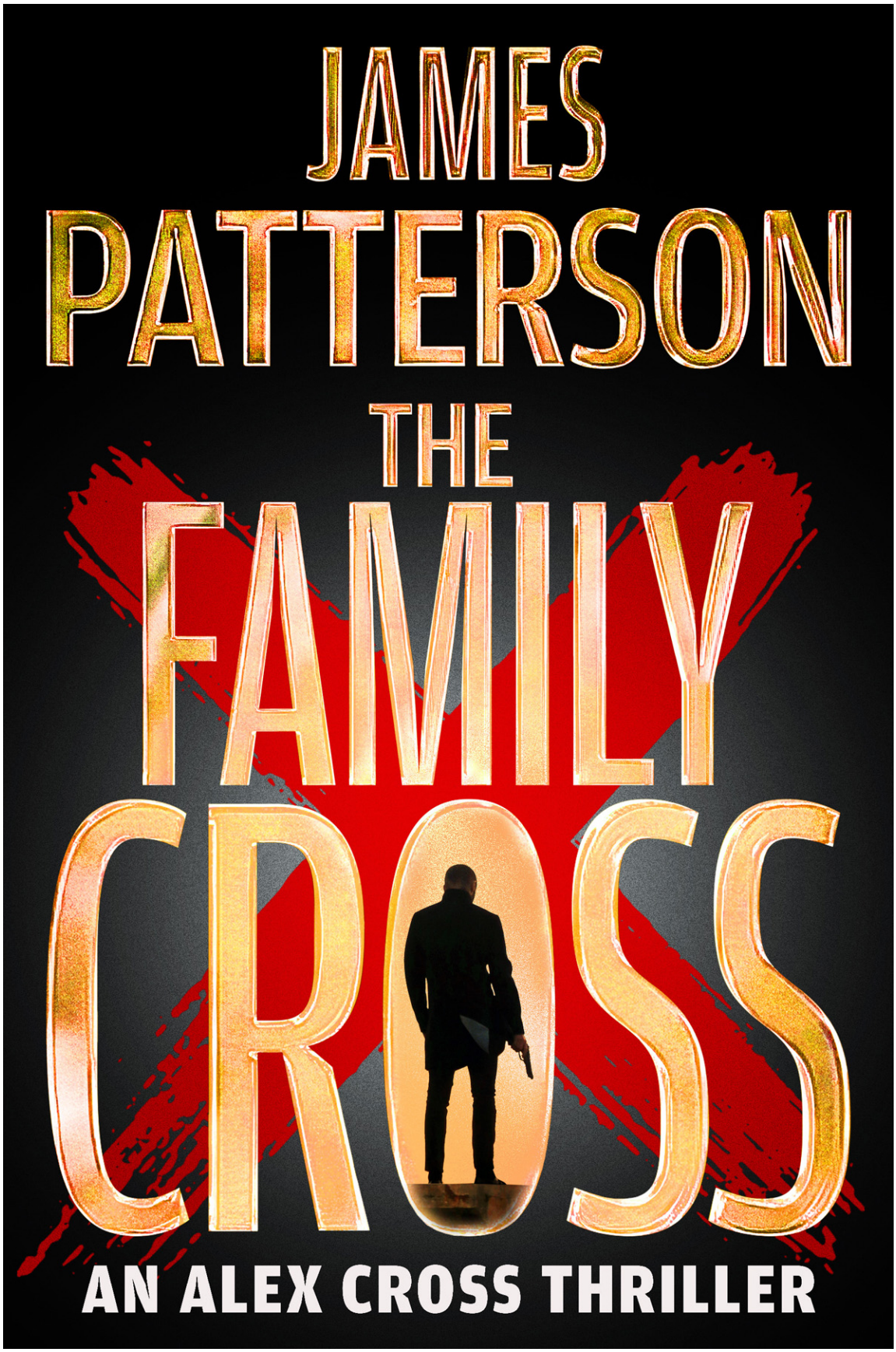
JAMES PATTERSON

THE FAMILY CROSS



AN ALEX CROSS THRILLER


JAMES
PATTERSON
THE
FAMILY
CROSS
AN ALEX CROSS THRILLER

OceanofPDF.com

THE FAMILY CROSS

JAMES PATTERSON

LB
LITTLE BROWN
NEW YORK

OceanofPDF.com

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2026 by James Patterson
Cover design by James Iacobelli
Cover photographs © Trevillion Images
Cover copyright © 2026 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher, including any use or reproduction for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies. The publisher expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) DSM Directive 2019/790 and any other equivalent legislation in force from time to time or elsewhere.

If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
littlebrown.com

First Edition: October 2026

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Alex Cross is a trademark of JBP Business, LLC

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or

email hachettespeakers@hbgusa.com.

Contact your local bookseller or special.markets@hbgusa.com regarding special discounts for bulk purchases.

ISBN 9780316569750 (ebook)

E3-20260627-JV-NF-ORI

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72

73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99

100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
About the Author
Books by James Patterson Featuring Alex Cross
OceanofPDF.com

1

LIGHTNING FLICKERED AND THUNDER rumbled over Washington, DC, early that Friday morning. The storms had been rolling through all night, but the old woman slept soundly.

Regina Cross was in her nineties and had been officially retired for many years, but her alarm still jangled at five a.m. just as it had every Monday through Friday for seven decades.

Nana Mama, as she was fondly known, had long believed that rising at five was one of her superpowers.

It was quiet at five. She could be alone at five. There were few demands from the outside world at five. Getting up at five was about working on her inner self.

Nana rolled over and, without opening her eyes, reached out to shut off the alarm. She lay there a few moments listening to the rain before cracking open first one eye and then the other.

Still here, the old woman thought, and laughed a little.

She wiggled her fingers and toes before slowly clenching each muscle group in her body from her calves upward, flexing her thighs, rear, abdomen, back, chest, arms, and hands. Finally, she rolled her head to the left and then the right.

She laughed softly to herself again. *Still kicking. Still smiling.*

Another of her superpowers: a sense of humor.

Though her right hip had been something of a bother lately, Nana Mama got out of bed with only minor aches, kicked her feet into slippers, and put on her robe. Then she held on to the foot of her bed, faced the crucifix over the headboard, and lowered her knees onto a soft cushion. She closed her eyes, clasped her hands at her heart, and began to pray.

Nana Mama started as she always did, by thanking her Savior for another day alive. She expressed gratitude for her family members and for the purpose and strength they'd always given her. She felt blessed at the

long and meaningful arc of her career as a teacher and school administrator and now as an English tutor on YouTube.

“Can You believe it, Lord?” she murmured and chuckled. “I can’t. But I enjoy it so much. I have no words, except to say that I am humbled by Your grace.”

She bowed her head, feeling a familiar warmth well up inside her. *I am not bored or tired. I am still in awe of the miracle of my life.*

Nana Mama did not end her prayer session with requests. She rarely did that anymore, believing that at her age, she’d been given two lifetimes of gifts already.

Just make me a better person while You can, Lord. That’s all I’m asking.

Then she let her mind fall silent and enjoyed the quiet until her hip began to nag at her. Rather than fight it, she took the pain as a signal to rise and go to her desk.

After clicking on the desk lamp, she sat, opened a little notebook, and read over her to-do list. She picked up a pen and crossed off those items she’d taken care of yesterday and noted the two tasks she had not yet completed. Then she wrote down the new tasks, large and small, that she wanted to get done today.

When Nana Mama was finished with her list, she used a pencil to number each goal, pausing several times to reassess, erase, and put them in a new order of importance. When she was satisfied, she could almost see the happy pattern of the day flowing smoothly. Another of her superpowers.

It was twenty minutes to six when she heard a door creak open. She closed her notebook, got up, and opened her bedroom door.

She saw her grandson Alex Cross sneaking down the stairs, his tie hanging loose over his crisp white dress shirt, his shoulder harness empty. He was back on the Metro Police force full-time, no longer just a consultant. He heard her and looked over.

“You want breakfast?” she asked.

Alex shook his head. “Sampson and I are taking the early shift at the soup kitchen before work. I’ll eat there.”

“Give my best to John and everyone.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“Love you too. When will you be home?”

“Unclear, as usual,” Alex said as he continued down the stairs.

Nana Mama was about to go to the kitchen and make some coffee but seeing Alex retrieve his service pistol from the lockbox in the closet stopped her cold.

Her grandson was a grown man. He'd had a long, decorated career hunting criminals for the FBI and the DC Metro Police. And yet the sight of him arming himself still got to her, released a protective instinct in her she could barely control. She took two steps toward him.

"Alex!" she hissed when he was halfway out the front door.

He turned to her with a puzzled expression on his face, and she smiled lovingly at him. "Be safe, hon."

He grinned at her. "Every day, Nana."

OceanofPDF.com

2

IN SOUTHEAST DC NOT long before dawn that same day, flashes of lightning periodically revealed the hulking silhouette of the last remnant of an abandoned highway project.

Blocked off at both ends by concrete barriers, the high, curving ghost ramp—the remaining quarter of a cloverleaf—stood awaiting demolition as it had for ten years, a blight between a lumberyard and a back channel of the Anacostia River.

The lightning flashes also revealed the bleak world beneath the ramp, the tents and impromptu shelters erected by hundreds of unfortunates: the sick, the tragic, the addicted, and the long forgotten, who were living their lives as best they could under the span.

The most coveted camping spots were high up on each of two six-story embankments that supported huge concrete stanchions cradling what remained of the ramp. The fortunate few who had those spots were tucked right up under the abandoned exit and sheltered from all the elements save the cold.

The rest of the dwellings spilled haphazardly toward the bottom of both embankments, increasingly exposed to wind and rain the lower they got. But the tents, tarps, and slapped-together structures on both sides of the camp stopped well short of what remained of an old road grade that ran beneath the ghost ramp toward the river.

In the throes of the latest storm, in the strobe-like lightning flashes, no one appeared to be out or moving on either embankment except for a thirteen-year-old boy named Boog who’d had to pee so badly that he left the plywood hovel where he lived and went out under a tarp slung over a three-legged table and two cracked plastic chairs.

He’d no sooner finished relieving himself than the rainstorm lost some of its power. Before returning to his nest, he peered uphill into the gloom and darkness under the ramp, a learned habit.

Then Boog turned back to the old army blanket that served as the door to his home and looked down the grade in the gathering gray light toward the roadbed, a mud-and-broken-pavement mess. He saw water sluicing around a car that had not been there before.

Not that people didn't boost cars, strip them, and abandon them beneath the ghost ramp now and then. But this car, a small black SUV, looked intact. And who knew what was inside? Boog had very little time to act.

If the car was unlocked, he wanted to be in before the rest of the vultures were even aware of its existence. Boog dropped fast down the steep slope and wove around the tents and shacks. He could see the vehicle better now.

An Audi! That's luxury!

If it was locked, he'd break the window, get in, and take whatever was there. *Finders keepers, right?*

Near the bottom of the embankment, he caught movement to his left, back toward the lumberyard. A shadow, the silhouette of someone, vanished into the brush that choked the ground on both sides of the old roadbed.

Had that person been inside the car already?

Feeling frantic, Boog jumped off the low concrete retaining wall at the bottom of the embankment and landed in the weeds and mud. He hated getting his sneakers dirty, but this was business. He might find something he could sell for enough money to buy food for a week, maybe enough for him to leave this godforsaken place for good.

Who knows what's inside? Boog excitedly jumped from pavement piece to pavement piece until he was fifteen feet from the Audi, which was almost broadside to him. He smelled gas and stopped.

Was the tank leaking? Had the guy been siphoning gas and spilled some?

Even though it was almost dawn and Boog was just fifteen feet away, he couldn't see through the Audi's tinted windows. He took several steps closer, and the gas smell got stronger.

Thunder rumbled. Lightning flashed and flooded the interior with brief, garish light. Boog froze in horror.

There was a person in the front seat!

Boog took a step back as another lightning bolt lit the scene, revealing big smears of what appeared to be blood down the window. He tried to see past the blood smears to get a better look at the figure inside.

He could swear he saw—

In his peripheral vision, back toward the brush where the shadow had vanished, he caught a flash of something intensely blue. He turned to it and saw a low wall of flame ignite.

The flames were a foot high even in the rain and came fast toward Boog and the car in a sinewy, hurrying line.

The boy felt the danger, spun, and ran. He jumped up on the concrete retaining wall just as the flames leaped a narrow channel of water sluicing down the road and continued racing toward the Audi.

The car ignited in a whoosh of flame that billowed up like a yawning mouth and ate the Audi whole. There must have been puddles of fuel mixed in with the rainwater. Boog knew what was going to happen and began scrambling up the embankment, trying to get far away before—

The SUV's gas tank exploded. The boy threw himself to the ground and covered his head with his arms. A few seconds later he peered back and saw a column of fire soar above the Audi almost high enough to lick the underside of the ramp.

The eruption sounded like a bomb going off and woke the other citizens of that wretched place. They started shouting and crawling from their tents and shacks to see what had happened. Boog lay on the slope, shaking, staring at the burning car, and mourning the loss of what had seemed a sure score just a few minutes ago.

"Anyone got any marshmallows?" a woman up the embankment from him called.

He heard guffaws at that, and a man said, "I've got s'mores fixings."

Boog felt ill. He looked up at the people huddled there in the wavering firelight, felt tears coming on, and yelled, "There's a… there's someone in there! You want to cook on that?"

OceanofPDF.com

3

ONCE A WEEK, FRIDAYS usually, my best friend and partner, John Sampson, and I volunteer for the early shift in the kitchen of St. Anthony's Catholic Church. It's both a giveback—a reminder of just how good we've had it in life—and a chance for us as police officers to build rapport with a community that frequently goes unnoticed but often sees all.

It was raining hard that morning, thunder booming, the basement lights flickering at the lightning strikes. Sampson was watching bacon topped with brown sugar and cayenne under the broiler. I whisked three dozen eggs and wondered whether I was making too much.

"Not a big turnout," I said, eyeing the line of fifteen hungry, wet folks waiting for us to throw open the aluminum grate.

"Rain's supposed to let up," Sampson said. "Then we'll see the surge."

"Coffee's good to go," I said, checking the big brewing machine in the corner. "I'm going to get it out there first."

"Smart," Sampson said. "Warm them up."

Beyond the grate, back in the line, a woman in her forties wearing a filthy trench coat heard us and yelled, "Pop-pop, what, what? Coffee futures up, up, up! Earthquake in Sumatra! Coffee futures up, up, up!"

Other people in line began to groan as I filled one of the urns.

"Better calm her down before things get wild," Sampson said.

"On my way," I said, picking up the urn and heading for the door.

We knew her as Anna Bananas, an infrequent visitor to the kitchen who never left St. Anthony's without at least three bananas sticking out of the pockets of her trench coat. She lived on the streets somewhere, suffered from Tourette's syndrome, and seemed to be bipolar, sometimes on a high and pontificating, sometimes reduced to gibberish and confusion.

That morning she was clearly on one of her towering upswings, which we had seen turn chaotic in the past.

"Pop-pop, what?" she cried again, shaking her short dreads. "Is Bananas

wrong? Coffee up, up, up. Money up, up, up. But nothing for the street. Nothing for the people under the bridge."

"Save it for the next socialist pep rally," a big shaggy guy behind her said, and several people in line started laughing.

"Pop-pop-pop-pop," she sputtered. "Nothing, nothing, nothing," she said to the big shaggy guy in a voice that turned seething. "People beneath the bridge, we get nothing. No food. No cops. Pop-pop-pop. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

Coming through the door with the urn, I said, "Anna, Anna, Anna! Let's get you warmed up with some fresh coffee."

Anna Bananas looked over at me with sudden interest. "Coffee futures. Up! Up!"

"Heard that," I said. "Big earthquake in Sumatra."

"Pop! Pop!" she said and walked closer as I set the urn on a table. I poured a paper cup of coffee for her.

She looked me in the eye and said, "You a cop?"

"Detective."

She blew air through her lips, making them vibrate and form spit bubbles the way a baby does. "Did you know that a society is judged by the way it treats the people on the lowest rungs of the ladder?"

"I didn't know that," I said. "But you'll get no argument from me."

Anna Bananas squinted her left eye. "Things are bad under the bridge, and you police won't come."

I didn't know exactly what she was talking about but nodded. "Okay?"

Her face clouded. "Pop-pop. Don't just agree with me, man. What do you know?"

I sighed. "I know you're hungry, Anna, and so is everybody else in line, so I should go finish making the eggs so we can open on time."

She glared at me as I turned away, hoping she wouldn't explode into a tirade.

A phone rang, and I glanced back to see Anna answer a battered cell. "Talk. Talk."

I was shutting the kitchen door when she screamed, "Pop-pop-pop! Mr. Detective! I told you it was bad under the bridge!"

OceanofPDF.com

4

I WATCHED THROUGH THE grate as Anna Bananas cursed at me and then everyone else before fleeing from the basement. I admit I felt relief at her departure. I picked up the mixing bowl and the whisk and finished preparing the eggs.

“Anna Bananas does have a point,” I said to Sampson as I poured the eggs into a hot cast-iron skillet. “The way people at the bottom of the ladder are treated is the true measure of a society.”

“Society is scoring pretty low by that measure,” Sampson said, taking the pan of bacon from under the broiler and setting it on the stove. “Something has to give on that front.”

“I hear you,” I said. It was part of why we did the work here.

Soon we had piping-hot scrambled eggs in a large serving tray and a second tray piled high with John’s special bacon and toast. We threw up the grate and pushed the trays forward.

“Appreciate it,” the big shaggy guy in the army jacket said as we doled out the food. “Tough night for some of us out there.”

“Glad we could help,” I said, smiling. “Hope your day is drier.”

He laughed, showing a missing lower canine. “We can only hope.”

The rain let up around twenty minutes later. As Sampson predicted, there was a doubling of the hungry, and it was all we could do to keep up until the next shift arrived and helped us over the peak of the demand.

“This continues, we’re going to need a bigger kitchen,” I said to Sampson at a quarter to eight.

Sampson’s phone rang before he could reply. He answered, listened, and said, “Where was this?” After a pause, he said, “I have Cross here with me.” After another pause, he said, “We’re on our way.”

He hung up and took off his apron. “We’ve got a body in a burned car under an abandoned off-ramp down by the Anacostia River.”

“I know where that is,” I said, taking off my own apron. “Behind the

lumberyard. Big encampment of homeless people there, I think."

We quickly had a bubble flashing on top of Sampson's new F-150 and our siren wailing. We drove over the bridge to Anacostia and then south along the river until the off-ramp came into view behind a screen of brush that separated it from the lumberyard. It was a quarter past eight by then and the sun was breaking through, glary and hot for May.

John parked behind a patrol car blocking the alley-like way ahead.

We got out to talk to the officer, whose name badge said DENNISON. He and his partner had taped off the area, but he told us the ground had already been trampled by people from the encampment who'd gone down for a look after the flames died.

"When did all this happen?" I asked.

"A little before six, we guess," Officer Dennison said.

"Guess?"

"The trolls don't like to talk."

"Trolls?" Sampson frowned. "We're talking about humans down on their luck, Officer."

Dennison put up his hands. "That's what a lot of them call themselves, Detective. Trolls. And PUBs. You'll see."

I said, "PUBs?"

"Stands for 'people under the bridge.' I'm telling you, it's real tribal back in there."

"How many in the tribe?" Sampson asked.

Dennison shrugged. "Two hundred? Maybe more than that? I don't know. Hard to tell. Place like this, people come and go, you know? Anyway, Gleason, my partner, he's in there guarding the scene, waiting on you."

We thanked Dennison and walked to where an old road of sorts cut into the dense wet foliage, which in the building heat made us feel like we were in a steam room. Drenched with sweat, we came to an overgrown clearing in the trees that gave us a cleaner look at the ramp and the stanchions that supported it.

Graffiti covered almost every inch of the massive concrete structure.

"That kind of sums it up, I guess," I said.

"What does?" Sampson said as we began to pick our way down the old roadbed.

I gestured at the biggest, most colorful graffiti painted in ornate scrollwork along the side of the ramp. It read *The Bridge to Nowhere.*

“I see it,” John said. “And they see us.”

“Who?”

“The trolls. The PUBs. Quite a few of them. Look up, under the ramp.”

I shaded my eyes from the sun and saw a score of adults and teens watching us from high up. There were more people down on the embankments that supported the ramp’s opposing stanchions, and I saw the suggestion of primitive shelters beyond.

I said, “Didn’t Anna Bananas use that same phrase this morning? *People under the bridge*?”

Sampson shrugged. “Dunno. I was focused on bacon.”

“You’re very mission-oriented.”

“I’ll own that.”

We rounded a corner. The ground ahead was a quagmire of reddish mud and broken pavement pieces that ran under the ramp to the car, which was still smoking.

Officer Gleason saw us and waved us to the right of the mess, where we were able to cross toward him and the yellow tape without losing our shoes. As we got closer, I could see more of the Bridge to Nowhere encampment. The shanties and tents started about a third of the way up each embankment and grew denser higher up beneath the ramp.

It was shocking to see. It was worse to smell.

Knowing we were being observed by dozens of eyes as we neared the police tape, Sampson muttered, “Looks like a miniature version of a slum I saw in Rio once.”

“People shouldn’t have to live this way,” I said. “Especially in the nation’s capital.”

“People shouldn’t have to live like this anywhere,” Sampson said. We jumped across a small rivulet of rainwater and came up alongside Officer Gleason. Gleason’s partner was right. The muddy area around the burned Audi had been trampled.

We introduced ourselves to Gleason. “No one’s talking,” he told us.

“Heard that,” I said. I ducked under the tape and walked to the burned vehicle, smelling the acrid odors still coming from the smoking wreckage.

Sampson followed, putting his mouth and nose in the crook of his arm

as we came up alongside the Audi. The explosive heat had been so extreme, the glass in all the windows was blown out, giving us an unobstructed view from several angles of the charred corpse inside.

OceanofPDF.com

5

AWARE OF THE AUDIENCE still monitoring us from above, John Sampson and I moved slowly counterclockwise around the car and the burned body. The upper torso had pulled away from what remained of the front seat and was curled forward and down, arms at the sides, forehead resting against what was left of the dash.

“Male, I think,” John said, peering in the driver’s side.

“Male,” I agreed, looking through the windshield frame at the blackened back of the skull. “And I don’t think he burned to death.”

Sampson stood up. “Died somewhere else and was brought here?”

“Gimme a second,” I said, returning to the side of the car. I stuck my head in and held my breath while I quickly inspected the charred flesh and bone at the back of the victim’s skull. I found the injury I’d suspected would be there, low on the left occipital bone.

I pulled my head back out and said, “He was shot before the fire. There’s a clear small-caliber bullet hole in his skull. And see the posture? Curled forward and down?”

“I do.”

“It suggests he was held up long enough after death by a seat-belt harness for his body to become stiff with rigor.”

“Or the heat caused his muscles to contract and pull him forward.”

“Or both.”

Sampson nodded, said, “And when the fire ate away the seat belts, the body fell forward against the dash and burned to charcoal.”

“That’s my take,” I said, turning my attention to the north embankment. The people under the bridge were still watching us, mostly in silence.

I was going to suggest we each take a side of the camp and start climbing up to canvass the spectators when I heard an all-too-familiar voice shouting behind me.

“Pop-pop-pop! I told you life was bad under the bridge!”

I turned to find Anna Bananas beyond the yellow tape and up the north embankment, still in her filthy trench coat and pointing an accusing, trembling finger at me. “I told you and pop-pop-pop other cops. No one came, ’cause no one cares about trolls who live under the Bridge to Nowhere.”

I held up my palms as I walked toward her. “We’re here now, Anna.”

She scowled and shook her head, neck, and shoulders like a horse pestered by flies. “You cops don’t listen. Nobody listens to us nobodies. You don’t see. You don’t hear. Whole country’s dying. Whole country’s burning.”

“Burning?” I said, ducking under the tape. “Like the car?”

Anna sneered at me. “You think I burned that bugger? I was with you, a long way from home. Remember?”

“I remember the call you got,” I said, climbing toward her. “Was it about this car burning?”

Anna shrugged, began worrying at the buttons of her coat.

“Did you call this in?” I asked.

Sadness crossed her face. “They seen too much already.”

Stopping a few feet below her, I said, “Who’s seen too much already, Anna?”

“Kids,” she said softly and gazed at the ground.

I frowned. “The kids who live here under the bridge, Anna?”

The glare was back. “Pop-pop-pop. You gonna contact child protective services on me?”

Child protective services. Anna Bananas has kids? Here?

Things were getting very complicated. I glanced up the hill and took in the abject squalor. I tried to be as compassionate as possible.

“We’re here for other reasons, Anna,” I said. “Did your children call 911?”

Anna kept worrying at her buttons and would not make eye contact. “Maybe.”

“Can we talk to them?”

“Maybe,” she said.

OceanofPDF.com

6

ANNA LED ME AND Sampson up the side of the north embankment, which was tiered with narrow benches between each rise that supported the makeshift shelters clinging to the underside of the Bridge to Nowhere.

We were not surprised to find that the lowest and most exposed tents and shacks were occupied by people in their mid-fifties and older, some alert, others seemingly lost in dementia and muttering to themselves. The elderly were the largest and fastest-growing sector of the homeless population. They were also unlikely to challenge the younger people who occupied the upper decks of the encampment.

As we climbed, we saw fewer elderly people and more families, and above them, in the highest spots, were young adults, most of them men.

Many of the people watched us pass with suspicion and wariness. They looked as if they'd been cheated and battered by life and expected nothing but more threats to their existence. About three-quarters of the way up the embankment, we stopped in front of a boxlike structure of tarps set flush against the uphill side of the north stanchion.

Anna got agitated and called, "Pop-pop-pop, Emma? Luke?"

"Mom?" a girl replied, sounding relieved. The tarp rustled. "I told you not to go out by yourself without your—"

A girl of around fourteen slipped out from behind the tarp and immediately stopped talking. Emma was clean and wearing clean clothes. She had curly brown hair like her mother, but hers was brushed. She was instantly on guard when she saw us.

"Who are you? CPS?"

"Police, Emma," Sampson said, showing his badge. "We were wondering if you saw the car burning?"

She looked us over. "Like maybe for two seconds after it exploded. I had to take care of my brother, Luke. He's got the flu. And I figured Mom had gone out on her own. So I went back inside."

Anna twisted her hands as she watched her daughter.

“You take care of your brother and your mom, Emma?” I asked quietly.

“She’s good to me,” Anna said. “Makes me take my pills. Good to everyone.”

“How old’s your brother?” Sampson asked.

“Nine,” Emma said. “Why?”

Sampson said, “Because kids your age should not be living like this. We can get you all into a shelter.”

The girl crossed her arms. “We’ve tried. Know what it’s like to pack up everything you own, go somewhere, find out there’s no room, then have to go back again?”

Her mother said, “Pop-pop-pop. We gave that up when we came home last time. Decided to make a stand here.”

“Emma,” I said. “Did you call 911 about the burning car?”

She shook her head. “That was my friend. He says he saw the whole thing.”

Sampson said, “Who’s your friend?”

Emma pointed to a shack about twenty yards away on the same tier. It was built of scrap wood and tarps and stood next to a three-legged table and two busted plastic chairs. “Boog. He lives there with his mama. When she’s around.”

I looked at Anna and then her daughter. “We’re going to get you some help. I promise you that.”

“We don’t want it,” Emma said firmly. “They’ll separate us. You want to know about that car, you go talk to Boog and leave us be. And don’t worry, I’ll make sure my mom takes her meds.”

OceanofPDF.com

7

I DECIDED NOT TO fight the girl.

"You in school, Emma?" I asked. "Is your brother?"

She crossed her arms again. "We start Monday. That's when they said they had room for us."

Sampson said, "At what school?"

"He's in Savoy Elementary," Emma said. "I'm at Taft Middle. I'm behind a grade. We both are."

I studied her. "I have the feeling you'll be good at poker someday, young lady. In the meantime, we'll talk to your friend Boog."

Her arms fell to her sides, but her hands stayed in loose fists.

"He'll talk," she said. "I think he feels bad about it."

We left them and crossed to Boog's shack, though I vowed to return soon. Sampson knocked on a piece of plywood above an old army blanket nailed up as a door.

The blanket moved. A boy in his early teens stuck his head out, looked up at us. "You police?"

Sampson and I showed him our badges. "You Boog?" I said.

He crawled all the way out and stood, straw and dust in his hair. He was wearing a filthy blue T-shirt, sweatpants, and slides. "Yeah, I'm Boog."

"Real name? Age?"

"Robert Bogner," he said, acting uncomfortable. He looked past us, up the embankment. "I'm thirteen."

It hurt my heart to realize this boy, living under these conditions, was not much older than my son Ali.

I followed his gaze and glanced up at the shadows. I saw a group of people in their twenties watching us from the ramp joists.

"You live here alone, Boog?" Sampson asked.

"Nah," Boog said, scratching the back of his neck. "With my mother, but she's not here right now."

“What’s her name?”

“Nelly Bogner.”

I filed the name away, then asked, “Did you see the car burn?”

“Saw it get lit,” Boog said. “I know all about it. But…”

“But what?” Sampson said. “If you saw something, tell us.”

The kid’s eyes darted up the embankment again, then he rubbed his belly, his face tormented.

“Can you get me something to eat before I tell you? I got no breakfast this morning and no dinner last night.”

An hour later, I felt like I’d been conned—for a good cause, but still conned. Boog was polishing off his second cheeseburger at a greasy spoon half a mile from the Bridge to Nowhere on the far side of the lumberyard. He’d been truthful with us, but he spoke sparingly, slowing the delivery of what he’d actually witnessed to get the maximum amount of food out of us.

Sampson drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “So who lit the car on fire, Boog?”

He munched one of the last fries on his plate before shrugging. “I didn’t actually see the person’s face.”

“You said you saw everything, kid,” John growled.

“I did see everything. Except whoever lit it.”

“Give it to us back to front,” I said.

“Can I get some more fries first?” he asked. “And a refill on the cherry Coke?”

I signaled the waiter and held up a fry; he nodded his understanding.

Sampson said, “Talk, kid, or we’re taking you to juvie.”

“Hey, don’t do that,” he said, real fear in his voice. “My mom *is* coming back. She always does. She’s a singer. A really good one.”

Sampson and I remained quiet, just looking at him.

“Okay, okay,” he said, and told us what he’d seen.

Boog said he’d gotten up to pee before dawn and went out under the tarp. The rain started to let up, and he saw the car on the road. When he climbed down to get a better look at it, a flash of lightning revealed the shape of someone sitting upright in the front seat.

“I went nearer, trying to see inside the Audi, and I smelled something

like gas but different, you know? Then there was a big, like, double flash of lightning and I saw blood on the window and I thought I saw… oh, I don't know. But then I definitely saw a little flare, and then fire came like a snake from over near the brush."

Sampson said, "You mean a flare like an emergency-flare thing?"

"No, no, just like, I don't know, one of those mini-blowtorch cigarette lighters they sell in gas stations? The kind with, like, a big blue flame. Anyway, like I said, the fire, like, ran up in a line and kept on right through the mud and water to the Audi, then the flame went *whoosh* and, like, swallowed the car whole, and it exploded."

I said, "Let's go back a little bit. When there was that double flash of lightning, what was it that you thought you saw? It sounded like you might've seen something, but now you're not sure. Is that right, Boog?"

The kid lowered his eyes and nodded.

"What do you think you saw?"

"I don't really know," he said.

"Close your eyes a moment," I said, and waited until he did. "Now go back to early this morning. What did you think you saw in that second lightning flash?"

The kid licked his lips. "A collar." He opened his eyes and nodded. "The guy in the car was wearing a collar."

Sampson grimaced. "You mean like a pet collar?"

Boog looked at John as if he were an alien.

"Nah," he said. "Like a white collar with a black shirt. Like a reverend would wear."

OceanofPDF.com

8

SO FAR, REGINA CROSS'S day had gone just as she'd imagined it would that morning: smooth and productive, flowing easily. After Alex left for the soup kitchen, Nana Mama made breakfast for Ali and Bree, then Alex's youngest child went off to middle school, and his wife went off to give a deposition at the security firm where she worked in Northern Virginia.

The old woman sat quietly after they'd gone, drinking her coffee and reading two newspapers. These days she read the news on her iPad, mainly because of how easy it was to enlarge the font. Then she padded over to her room to change into proper leaving-the-house clothes.

A little before ten a.m., an Uber picked her up and brought her to her gerontologist. The doctor seemed happy with her latest round of tests and decided not to change any medications. Another Uber took her to the grocery store, and a third brought her home with the ingredients for that night's dinner of chicken, sweet potatoes, and onions in a simple wine sauce.

After putting away her groceries, Nana Mama ate a small lunch, then took a nap.

Refreshed and back on her feet twenty minutes later, Nana Mama donned gardening gloves and a broad-brimmed straw hat, went through the back door into the high-walled yard, and spent an hour with a hand trowel turning over the soil in four waist-high beds that John Sampson had built for her.

Gardening gave Nana Mama a chance to return to a slower rhythm of life, which seemed to move faster and faster with each passing decade. The pace of things today felt like a whirlwind accelerating around her.

As the nonagenarian got ready to add manure and compost materials to the raised garden, she began to feel a bit lightheaded. She considered going over to sit on a bench in the shade but then realized the problem was likely

dehydration. She had not had enough water that morning.

Leaving her gloves and hat on the railing above the back steps, Nana Mama went inside, telling herself she'd drink two full glasses before returning to her gardening work. She felt better after drinking the water at her kitchen table, but when she looked at the thermometer, she saw that the temperature was pushing eighty. She'd wait to go back outside until the sun had lost some of its sting. In the meantime, she decided to work on her next YouTube video.

The videos had become a surprise hit in the waning days of the pandemic, and she'd become energized by the idea of giving interesting lectures to an audience that was vast by most classroom standards. Last month, *Regina Cross's Book Talk* had garnered more than one hundred thousand views.

Her upcoming talk would be about the late Ernest J. Gaines's 1971 masterpiece *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the saga of a girl freed from slavery who'd left one plantation only to work on another as an impoverished sharecropper; she lived to the age of one hundred and ten and bore witness to every change in the South from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, from emancipation to reconstruction to Jim Crow to the early days of the civil rights movement.

Nana Mama had always loved the book, not only for its historical accuracy but for the way Gaines brought Jane's story to life. Whenever she opened the novel, she felt transported to another time, another place, watching Jane's life unfold amid remarkable circumstances.

Nana Mama already had the outline of her talk, which would first focus on the language Gaines used to describe Jane as she aged. Today she planned to organize her thoughts about the author himself and his own background—how he'd grown up on the remains of a plantation, living in former enslaved people's quarters similar to Jane's.

The plantation of Gaines's own impoverished childhood and his remarkable research were a constant inspiration in his creation of Jane's complex world, she wrote on a legal pad at the kitchen table. *Not only would his personal memories do great service to the…*

She stopped and frowned. *What word am I looking for?*

OceanofPDF.com

9

NANA MAMA ADJUSTED HER glasses. She read what she'd written so far, trying to get the missing word to come to her.

Is it narrative*? No, that isn't it.*

She reread the sentence fragment on the page, believing her train of thought would progress again as it had just moments before.

It's right there on the tip of my tongue. Something like correct*? Well, Gaines* is *correct. But it's not that… it's more like…*

Nana Mama blinked, grasping for the word that seemed just out of reach. She set her pen down, knowing from past experience that she should do something else and let her subconscious work things out.

She got to her feet and headed back outside to finish preparing the garden beds. It had been the very first thing she'd written on her list of goals that morning, and she was determined to see the task done.

Halfway to the back door, she noticed an odd sensation in her right hand. The sensation grew as she walked, not prickly, not fiery, not unpleasant, just a buzzing feeling that seemed to prance around and through her fingers, palm, and wrist.

Nana Mama reached for the doorknob, then paused to rub the tingling in her right wrist, wondering whether she'd overdone it hand-turning all that wet soil earlier. *Is it arthritis? Or just too much for my tendons?*

The old woman decided she'd just done too much and started to turn back. Then she remembered she'd left her hat and gloves out on the railing. She'd just grab those and bring them inside.

Nana Mama opened the back door. The buzzing in her hand was gone. That was good. She stepped out onto the stoop, and the screen door swung shut behind her.

Her gardening gloves were right there where she'd left them. But where was her hat? She looked over the rail and saw it lying on the brick patio below.

Sighing, Regina went to the steps. She made sure she had a good hold of the rail with her left hand, because the buzzing had started again in her right. Her upper lip tightened as she swung out her foot, then she lost her balance.

Her knee buckled.

Nana Mama toppled sideways. She saw the patio coming and hit the bricks hard before she plunged dark and deep, beyond all memory, words, or thoughts.

OceanofPDF.com

10

ALI CROSS WALKED HOME from the bus, enjoying the sunny weather after all the rain and the thunderstorms that had rattled his bedroom windows the night before. He had big tests coming up but he was prepared already.

When he realized that meant more free time, he had an exciting idea. He could ride his mountain bike this afternoon.

Ali had not been out on his bike since late last fall, and he quickened his pace, thinking about having a snack with Nana Mama before going out for his ride. Maybe he'd go down Capitol Hill and do part of the bridle path on the National Mall.

He loved that idea and started to trot, holding tight to the shoulder straps of his backpack and thinking it might be time to ask his dad if they could go somewhere with single-track trails and jumps, someplace where he could improve his mountain-biking skills and learn to handle terrain trickier than sidewalks and bridle paths.

When Ali reached his home on Fifth Street, he bounded up the front steps. He'd change into his biking gear, eat a snack, then fetch his bike from the shed in the backyard. He used his key to open the front door and entered, calling, "I'm home, Nana!"

He heard no reply after shutting the door, which was unusual. He didn't remember his great-grandmother mentioning any appointments that afternoon—Nana kept those kinds of things noted and organized on a chalkboard calendar on the wall by the doorway to the kitchen. Before he left for school, he'd seen that she had an appointment with her doctor today, but that was in the morning, and there was nothing on the calendar after that.

Maybe she's out back, he thought as he climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He struggled into his biking gear, which barely fit. *I must have grown over the winter.*

He dug out his bike shoes, grabbed his phone, and went bounding back down the stairs into the front hall. He got his helmet from the closet and called out again. “Nana? You here?”

Still no answer. *She has to be out back. It’s, like, gardening season, right?*

He stopped in the kitchen, got a water bottle, and filled it, then carried his gear down the hall to the back door, which was ajar, moving in the breeze coming through the screen door.

“Nana?” he called as he pushed the screen door open.

He stepped onto the landing, looked down the stairs, and saw his great-grandmother lying on her belly, unmoving, on the bricks below the lowest riser, her head turned to the left. A tsunami of reactions, emotions, and thoughts hit Ali at once, almost swamping his ability to act.

Then his sheer love for the woman took over. Nana Mama had helped raise him. She was one of his favorite people. She had always been there for him.

Ali dropped his things and moved fast down the stairs. There was blood on the bricks around Nana Mama’s head, blood was seeping out of her mouth, and something was wrong with her right arm.

He swallowed, went to his knees, and put one hand gently on her neck and the other in front of her nose.

She’s breathing! And she has a heartbeat! Not strong, but I feel it!

Ali knew better than to move her, especially given the blood seeping from her head. He debated calling his dad but instead sent a text telling him to come straight home, that Nana Mama had fallen and that he was calling 911.

Which he did. The dispatcher, a woman with a gravelly voice, said, “This is 911, what is your emergency?”

“My name is Ali Cross. My great-grandmother has fallen down the stairs in our backyard and she is unconscious and bleeding from her head, but she has a heartbeat, and she is breathing,” Ali said, fighting off the urge to cry as the reality of it started sinking in. “I need an ambulance.”

“Give me your address, son,” the dispatcher said. “We have a lot of emergencies right now, but let me see how fast I can get someone there to help you. Don’t hang up.”

He gave her the address. She asked him to hold on.

Ali’s phone buzzed. His father was calling.

“Dad!” he said when he clicked over. “I found Nana Mama on the bricks at the bottom of the back stairs. She’s unconscious but breathing. Her right arm looks bad, and she’s got blood around her head. The dispatch lady is sending an ambulance here.”

“I’m eight minutes away,” his father replied. “Tell the paramedics Nana should go to St. Anthony’s. It’s closest and all her records are there.”

Before Ali could reply, his dad hung up. In the far distance, he heard the faint wail of a siren. He looked down at Nana Mama and all at once felt a terrible fear of the unknown.

OceanofPDF.com

11

JOHN SAMPSON SLAPPED A bubble on the roof of his pickup and lit up the siren the second I hung up with Ali. We'd only just gotten back to the truck after spending the better part of our frustrating day under the ghost ramp.

"Lucky we're close to your place," Sampson said through gritted teeth, weaving in and out of traffic, speeding toward a usable on-ramp to the Beltway. From there, it was one mile to my exit and then six blocks home. "And she's tough, Alex."

"Tougher than tough," I said, flashing on a childhood memory of my nine-year-old self coming to live at Nana Mama's house, climbing up the steps along with my older brothers, Charlie, Blake, and Aaron.

We hadn't needed to knock. She'd flung the front door open and greeted us, crying with grief and joy and open arms.

"My good boys," Nana Mama had said, hugging us fiercely to her. "Welcome home. I'm so deeply sorry for what's happened, but welcome home. I love you all and I hope together we can get over everything we've lost."

Sampson had to swerve hard to avoid hitting a motorcyclist as we came onto the Beltway, which shook me from that early memory and returned me to the present difficult moment. I called Ali back.

"We're about three minutes out now," I said. "How long for the ambulance?"

"Like, twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes!"

"The dispatch lady said they got fifteen emergency calls in the five minutes before I called."

"Is Nana still unconscious?"

"She opened her eyes and kind of groaned, but her eyes are shut again."

"Hang on," I said. "We'll be there in less than two minutes."

I hung up, looked at Sampson. “We’re taking her to St. Anthony’s Hospital.”

He kept his eyes on the road. “I don’t know, Alex. She fell and hit her head. We don’t know what’s happened to her head or her spine. She needs to come out of there on a backboard.”

“I thought of that,” I said. “You still have those orange plastic traction boards you use to get out of mud and sand in the back, right?”

John liked to drive his truck off-road on weekends, and he had the rig set up for it, including a winch and self-rescue gear like the boards.

“Strapped to the left wall in the bed,” he said. “They’ll keep her stable.”

A minute later, we skidded to a stop in front of the same house I’d walked into back when I was nine years old. Sampson killed the siren and left the bubble on.

I jumped out of the passenger seat and ran across the narrow strip of lawn that doglegged around the house to the gate to our backyard. Ali had heard us coming and had the gate open.

“She’s right here, Dad,” he said, bursting into tears. “I’ve been right here with her.”

“Thank you,” I said, fighting my own tears when I saw her.

“Dad, I must have found her right after it happened, like maybe five minutes after,” he said as I knelt beside her. “I looked close at the blood, and it’s really fresh.”

“I see it,” I said, looking at the blood that had seeped out from under her head. And her arm was definitely broken, likely in several places.

My grandmother opened her eyes, looked at me, and made a noise in her throat.

“I’m right here, Nana,” I said. “We’re taking you to the hospital.”

She sighed and closed her eyes again.

“Go to Nana’s room and get that padded collar thing she uses when she reads. And a blanket,” I instructed Ali.

“Okay!”

Sampson came charging in with an orange plastic board about five feet long with big grooves on the surface designed for tire treads to bite.

“We still doing this?” he asked.

“Fast as we can,” I said.

John and I got the board down next to her and discussed how best to

slide her onto it. Luckily, my grandmother was built like a bird. I don't think she weighed more than a hundred pounds.

"We'll slide her easy," Sampson said, kneeling on the opposite side of the board and putting rachet straps under it in two places.

"Nana," I said. "We're going to put your reading collar on. Don't move, okay?"

She made a whimper as Ali handed me the padded collar.

I got it under her neck without moving her head and cinched it firmly in place with the Velcro strips while Sampson laid the blanket over the board. I knew none of this was standard of care for emergency transport, but she wasn't stable, and we couldn't wait twenty minutes for the ambulance to show up.

"Here we go," I said, getting into position opposite John. "Ali, you keep her head supported."

He knelt at Nana Mama's head, and we all slid our hands under her. When I felt Sampson's fingertips, I said, "Nana, you let us do the work. On three."

My grandmother gave no indication that she'd heard me, but we managed to slide her smoothly onto the board, keeping her in the same position, belly-down, head turned to the left. John gently folded the blanket up around her and then bound her in place with the straps.

I saw Ali had blood on his hands and looked over to where Nana Mama's head had rested on the bricks. "There's not a ton of blood there. No more than you'd get with a typical scalp wound," I said with relief.

We picked up the board and moved quickly through the gate, across the lawn, and down to Sampson's truck. He had the tailgate open and the cap window up.

I put her up on the tailgate, feet aiming in, then jumped up and crawled inside. Sampson pushed her to me, slammed the tailgate shut, and ran around to the driver's seat.

I looked at Ali. "Call 911 again, cancel the ambulance, then notify Bree, Damon, and Jannie. Tell everyone that we'll be at St. Anthony's."

He nodded hesitantly as we pulled away.

OceanofPDF.com

12

MY FIRST WIFE, MARIA, had been a social worker at St. Anthony's, and over the years, my family and I had had our fair share of emergency department visits there.

An ambulance was coming from the south and turned into the grounds before we did. It joined another ambulance parked in the bay. Sampson pulled over in front of the ER entrance.

I raced into the waiting room and saw an old friend, a nurse named Sarah Desrochers, at the triage desk talking to a young mom carrying a coughing little girl. I ran right to her.

"Sarah, I'm sorry to interrupt, but my grandmother has had a bad fall."

"Mrs. Cross?"

"Broke her arm and hit her head. Seems in and out of consciousness. We have her outside in Sampson's pickup on a jerry-rigged backboard because there were no ambulances available to come get her."

"Every ER in the city is slammed, for some reason," Sarah said. She grabbed her phone and called for a gurney and nurses. When she hung up, the young mom complained, "We were here first."

"The emergency department is not first-come, first-served," the nurse said softly. "Your daughter is stable and she can wait just a few minutes longer."

Two nurses burst through the ER double doors with a gurney.

"I'm sorry to cut the line," I said to the mom, then hurried after the nurses, calling, "She's just outside. We had to improvise a backboard."

"Can she talk?" one nurse asked, a burly guy with a beard. His name tag said PATRICK.

I said, "I think she knows when I'm talking to her, but she hasn't verbally responded to anything. There's blood coming out of her mouth, like maybe she bit her tongue on impact."

Sampson waited behind the F-150, its tailgate down. Nana Mama, on the

rescue board, was already on the tailgate.

“On her belly—that’s different, huh, Rich?” Patrick said to the other nurse.

Sampson growled, “This is exactly how we found her except for the neck collar.”

“We didn’t want to roll her over,” I explained.

“Good call, actually,” said Rich. “Let’s keep her like this until a doc has examined her.”

“Agreed,” said Patrick.

We got out of their way as they lifted the board onto the gurney and strapped it down.

I looked at Sampson. “I’ll let you know as soon as I know something.”

“Praying for her, brother,” Sampson said. “You know how much I love her.”

“I’ll take your prayers. And she loves you too.”

The effort it took to speak about her in the present tense made me sink with sadness as John put up the tailgate and closed the rear window of the cap.

“Her name? Medical history? Your relationship?” asked Patrick, the bearded nurse, as they turned the gurney toward the ambulance bay entrance.

“Regina Cross, history of heart issues,” I said, following. “I’m Alex, her grandson. I have her medical durable power of attorney.”

“Is that on file here?”

“Yes, and her advance directive,” I said. I continued to tell him what I knew as we went up a ramp and through automatic double doors and into an emergency department jammed with patients.

A charge nurse came over, said, “Bay four just opened, what do we got?”

“Regina Cross, elderly female with cardiac history, fell down a short flight of stairs and hit her head on a brick patio,” Rich said as he and Patrick wheeled Nana Mama into a treatment bay. “Lost consciousness. Right arm looks fractured. Bleeding from the right side of her head and her mouth.”

“Let’s get vitals,” the nurse said. “I’ll get Dr. Ames to assess how we should handle moving her.”

“Sydney Ames?” I asked. “The trauma surgeon?”

“The same,” Rich said, starting an IV.

“She’s a friend of mine,” I said. “Friend of my grandmother’s too.”

“Hell of a doc,” Patrick said, putting a blood pressure cuff on Nana Mama’s left arm.

I stood there, knowing I should feel relieved because a first-rate physician and longtime friend of my family would soon be in charge, but I found myself swallowing the emotions surging through me.

For the first time I thought, *This could really be it. The end of an era.*

OceanofPDF.com

13

AFTER LEAVING ALEX AND Nana Mama at St. Anthony's Hospital, John Sampson called Pam Doolittle, a neighbor who occasionally babysat for his daughter, Willow, and whose son, Tomas, went to the same elementary school. Pam answered on the second ring and confirmed that she could pick up Willow from after-school and take her to her dance lesson.

"I'll be a little late getting home," Sampson said.

"Don't worry, I'll feed the kids dinner together," Pam told him.

"Great," he said. "Appreciate it."

He hung up and then called Metro PD's IT office, got Analise Clark, an old friend, and requested a database search for a cleric, priest, or minister who might've gone missing.

"Try ASAP and then take a look tomorrow and for the next few days in case no one has reported him gone yet."

"I'll let you know, John," Clark said.

On the way back to the encampment, Sampson called Willard Kane, Metro's chief of detectives, told him about Alex Cross's emergency situation, and filled him in on the early stages of the John Doe homicide/arson investigation.

"A torched Audi in a camp for homeless people," Kane said. "Any leads on the victim?"

Sampson told the chief about the boy who thought he saw a cleric's collar on the victim before the explosion, then he described how hard it had been to get statements from many in the camp, all of whom said they'd been hunkered down in their shelters when the Audi exploded.

"Maybe they were telling the truth," Kane said. "The storm *was* pretty bad. I had lightning hit a tree close to my house. Sounded like a bomb going off."

"I get it. Anyway, I think the arson guys should be wrapping up their

work at the scene and with the car. We talked to most of the people on one side of the encampment, but I want to go back and talk to the folks on the other side. I want to hear what they have to say."

The chief paused, then said, "The way you describe this place, it's almost like another culture."

"Certainly feels like it's their world and we're the outsiders."

"Then you need a guide, an insider, someone who knows the power structure and the fabric of the place."

Sampson thought about Anna Bananas and Boog. "I think you're right, Chief," he said. "Maybe Alex and I weren't asking the right questions this morning."

OceanofPDF.com

14

IN THE TRAUMA BAY, while Patrick got Nana Mama's vital signs, Rich crouched at the head of the gurney. "Regina, can you hear me?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Try calling her 'Nana Mama,'" I said.

"Nana Mama," Rich said, "can you hear me?"

Her eyelids fluttered. She replied in a muffled, soft whine.

"Can you open your eyes?"

Her left eyelid fluttered again and then opened.

"My name is Rich, and you're in the ED at St. Anthony's," the nurse said, pulling out a penlight. "Your grandson Alex is here. They said you had a fall down some stairs. Do you remember?"

"Yeah," she said weakly, thickly. "Dizzy."

"You were dizzy before you fell down the stairs?"

"Yeah," she said and shut her eyes.

"Stay with me, Nana Mama," Rich said, and she opened her eyes again. He shone the penlight in her left eye.

"BP's one sixty over ninety," Patrick announced. "Pulse ninety and irregular. Tell me about the cardiac history," he said to me.

"Uh, atrial fibrillation more than a decade ago. Catheter ablation. Diagnosed with congestive heart failure. Has had two heart attacks. Received a left-ventricular assist device and hasn't had any serious issues since."

A tall, strikingly handsome Black woman in blue scrubs stepped through the curtain into the bay. She looked at me, put her hand on my arm, and nodded before going to my grandmother's side.

"Regina, it's Sydney," Dr. Ames said. "Now, what have you gone and done to yourself this time?"

My grandmother made a humming, amused sound from her throat. Dr. Ames shone a light in her eyes, looked at the board under her.

“This is all plastic?” she asked.

“Far as I know,” I said. “Molded. Like a kayak.”

“No kayaks where I’m from,” Dr. Ames said.

She decided to have Nana Mama remain on the board for the time being and ordered X-rays of her arm and her cervical spine; they’d see if there were any vertebral fractures before they attempted to move her. She also ordered a CT scan of Nana Mama’s head and neck, but one of the two scanners was down, and there were more urgent cases ahead of her.

I was greatly heartened when Dr. Ames returned twenty minutes later pushing my grandmother’s gurney and smiling.

“No vertebral fractures that I can see,” the surgeon said. “She smacked the side of her head and probably has a concussion, but I think that right arm took the brunt of the fall. It’s broken in four places.”

“Ouch. But she’s going to be all right?”

“Let’s get her off that board and turned over so we can see the full extent of her injuries, then run a few tests before we make that call.”

Dr. Ames and the nurses were far more skilled at moving Nana Mama than John, Ali, and I had been. They told my grandmother what they were going to do and then did it, very fast, and within minutes she was lying in a hospital bed with an IV in her good arm and a nasal cannula delivering oxygen to address her low O_2 saturation.

An ugly four-inch gash was visible on one side of her head, high on her temple, just forward of her hairline, courtesy of the edge of the brick she’d hit. That side of her face was swollen. You could barely see her right eye. They also confirmed that she’d bitten her tongue when she fell.

“How are you feeling now, Ms. Regina?” the doctor asked.

My grandmother seemed confused by the question. She looked at me and then said thickly, “’Etter.”

“Better, that’s good,” Dr. Ames said. “We’re going to get you stitched up and then run a few more tests, okay? We’ll keep you here for the night.”

Nana Mama sighed. “Old.”

I laughed. “You kind of are.”

She smiled a little, the swelling on one side of her face making her grin uneven, sagging on the right, rising on the left. Then she made a grumbling noise and shut her eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

15

BENEATH AN UNCOMMONLY WARM May sun, John Sampson walked down the old roadbed toward the Bridge to Nowhere. The muddy ground had been baking in the heat most of the day and was almost dry.

Several people stood high up the embankment where he and Alex had met Boog, right under the ghost ramp and farthest from the road. They were observing him. One woman dressed in wild, colorful clothes stood on a girder that jutted out from under the bridge at its highest point, holding on to a piece of rebar for balance. In the upper corner of the embankment opposite them, two men were also watching him. Were they all posted there to keep an eye on him?

He decided to assume they were and kept walking toward the encampment, ignoring the sentries, unable to get away from the scent of human feces that wafted from the underbrush.

The closer he got, the more people he saw silently studying him. It made him feel like an outsider, like he was walking into a closed and alien society. And maybe that was, in some ways, the point.

He realized Chief Kane’s instincts were spot-on. Maybe it wasn’t a stranger, someone nonlocal, who’d driven in the pouring rain to the Bridge to Nowhere, shot the victim, torched the car and the corpse, and left. Maybe the killer lived under the bridge. Maybe the killer was one of the trolls.

When Sampson got close enough to look deep into the shadows beneath the ramp, he saw that the police tape was still up but the body was gone, and a winch was dragging the hulk of the Audi onto a flatbed. Two investigators he knew from the Metro Fire Department were standing to one side.

Hank Holder, an arson expert, had massive shoulders that rolled forward, humping his upper back. He also had long arms, bowed legs, and a wide forehead accentuated by thick black eyebrows.

His partner, Marian Gibbons, was waifish in comparison, a short, thin

blonde with intense green eyes and a highly analytical mind. She had a master's degree in chemistry from Rutgers and a keen understanding of how fires were born.

As Sampson walked toward them, he saw a line of small yellow flags running from the edge of the brush to the car. At the car, the yellow flags changed to red ones.

Boog called out from behind the near stanchion, "Hey, Detective. Welcome back to nowhere."

Sampson stopped and waited as the young teen climbed down to him.

"I was hoping I'd find you here," John said. "You hungry again?"

The kid nodded eagerly. "Always."

"Figured," Sampson said. "Go back to that diner, order what you want, and wait for me."

"What if they won't serve me?"

"With the amount of food we paid for this morning and the big tip we left, they'll serve you."

The kid grinned, glanced up toward the sentries, and said, "I'll see you there."

Sampson turned and walked toward the fire investigators. Boog called after him, "How long you gonna be?"

"Probably about half an hour," Sampson said. He ducked under the police tape and went up to Holder and Gibbons.

"Big John," Holder said, shaking Sampson's hand with a paw that felt twice the size of his own. "Long time."

"Least a year, Hank," Sampson replied, then grinned at Gibbons and shook her hand too. "About a month for us, but always good to see you, Marian."

"Likewise, Detective," she said.

As the tow truck drove off with the shell of the Audi strapped onto its flatbed, Sampson said, "What did you find?"

The fire investigators turned all business. Gibbons pointed to the line of yellow flags. "That's our burn trail from the ignition point to the car. But it wasn't regular gas. That's why the kid you interviewed said there was a whoosh and the fire engulfed the car."

"Okay? What was it?"

Holder said, "We won't know exactly until we run definitive tests, but

from where we’re standing, I’d say the car was doused in avgas.”

“Avgas?”

“Aviation gas. Jet fuel. Super-super-high-octane stuff used in piston-engine aircraft. There were two five-gallon tanks of it in the trunk. It’s what blew the back of the car all to hell.”

His partner nodded. “And broiled your victim and any evidence.”

OceanofPDF.com

16

JOHN SAMPSON LEFT the fire investigators about twenty minutes later.

On the way to the diner, he spotted two security cameras on the street close to where it met the road that ran parallel to the lumberyard. Even in a torrential rainstorm, these cameras might have picked up on a black Audi SUV sometime in the hours before dawn. He decided that after he talked with Boog again, he'd take a run down to the other end of the road behind the lumberyard and see if there were additional cameras the car might have driven past.

As he got out of his pickup down the street from the diner, Sampson saw a text from Alex:

Nana Mama better but not out of woods. Still waiting on CT scan because one of two is down, and four car-accident victims just came in. She'll spend night here. Bunch of tests ordered. I'll keep you posted.

He sent a thumbs-up emoji, checked his watch, and saw it was five p.m.

Sampson stuck the phone in his pocket and entered the diner. Boog was in the same booth they'd used earlier. A waitress was setting two bacon cheeseburger platters in front of him.

"Get him a salad too," Sampson said, sliding into the booth and pulling both platters toward him.

"Hey," Boog said. "Why?"

"You need to eat fresh vegetables so you won't have a heart attack in your thirties."

Scowling, Boog ate a fry and then two more.

"Your mother come back?" Sampson asked.

Boog's expression hardened. "That what this is about?"

"You go to school today?"

"Hard to go to school when you're caught up in a murder investigation. I'll go on Monday. Promise. And my mom's just off on a trip, working on a

new life for us."

"Uh-huh," Sampson said, taking a fry off a platter. "You in contact with her?"

"She texts me every day, lets me know she's okay," Boog said defensively.

"How long has she been on this trip?"

"I dunno. Couple of weeks?"

"Any other relatives around?"

He pursed his lips, sour, and shook his head.

Sampson sighed. "Son, I hate to tell you this, but your mother is being grossly negligent. You can't go on living alone like this."

"I knew it," Boog said, sounding disgusted. "I knew that's what this was about."

"It's not why I came," Sampson said. "But I am interested in your welfare, and I should be calling child protective services to have you placed in emergency foster care."

Boog looked sick and frightened. "Foster care? Detective, please don't do that. I been in that loop once and it was… I just can't. You've got to believe me. Sorry, man, but you do that and I'll run away, I swear it."

John could read the anguish and desperation on the boy's face. Boog had been in foster care, and the experience had damaged him. That much was plain.

"I believe you," Sampson said. "Tell you what—help me with some information, and I won't notify CPS right away. But the second your mother shows up, I want a call from you. If she hasn't come back in a week, I won't have a choice in the matter."

"A week works," Boog said, brightening. "She told me she was coming back next week anyway. I'm thinking she'll have found a new place for us to live on her trip. New start, you know?"

The waitress set a house salad in front of the teen. He wrinkled his nose, then shrugged, speared a cucumber, and chomped it.

Sampson figured Boog was lying but nodded. "Tell me about life under the Bridge to Nowhere."

Boog chewed some lettuce before saying, "We've only lived there a year. What do you want to know?"

"In a camp that big, there have to be leaders or at least people who

control things—you know, people who have more power than others."

Boog said nothing for several seconds, then snorted and laughed scornfully. "For sure, there are equals under the bridge and then some who are more equal than others. Like in that book *Animal Farm* we read in school last year."

Smart kid. "Who are the ones who are more equal than others under the bridge?" Sampson asked.

The young teen's brows knit. "Should be obvious. The high trolls, the ones who get to live on the upper-upper tiers, right under the ramp. You're out of the weather there. Roof overhead. You can build fires that heat up the concrete and steel. Sleep against it, keep you warm on a cold night. And you can see the whole camp from there. Spot danger from a long way off. Prime spots."

Sampson remembered the lookouts. "And how do you get one of those prime spots?"

"Depends on which embankment you're on. Things are usually peaceful on the north side, and you get your spot by how long you've lived under the bridge. But the south side? There's almost always a brawl. That's why most of them over there are young guys, seriously strong, and they know how to fight. Darwinism in action."

"So those are the high trolls?"

"They'll gobble you up," Boog said. "And the troll-ettes, their girlfriends."

"Is there a head high troll?" Sampson asked.

The teen hesitated, then said, "I tell you this, my mom gets two weeks to come back home, all right?"

"Not a chance. There's no bargaining here."

Boog grimaced.

John said, "Unless you want me to make a call to CPS right now. They can be here in minutes, you know."

"All right, all right," he said, and sighed. "There's two of them."

"Two head trolls?"

"Uh-huh. One on each side of the camp, north and south."

OceanofPDF.com

17

NANA MAMA WAS FINALLY taken off to have a CT scan, almost an hour and a half after she'd gotten the X-rays. She had a cast on her right arm, and the gash along her hairline had been stitched and bandaged.

As she was wheeled off to the radiology suite, she was alert enough to tell them that her head hurt. "I'm not surprised," the nurse said, "given that you hit a brick with it!"

A short while later, my wife, Bree, rushed into the room with Jannie and Ali trailing her.

"Where is she?" Jannie asked, sounding shaken. She was wearing her Howard track sweats and had probably come straight from practice. It wasn't the first time I'd been grateful that her college campus wasn't far from home. I'd texted my son Damon, too, but he was hours away in North Carolina, at grad school in Chapel Hill.

"Off for some more tests and scans," I said, then told them what I knew.

Bree gave me a big hug and a kiss. "Sorry I couldn't get here quicker. I was stuck in that deposition and didn't even have my phone. How is she?"

"Little touch and go," I said. "But we don't have to make any decisions until we understand exactly what happened to her."

Bree said, "From what I hear, Ali is the hero of the day."

Smiling, I said, "You've got that right."

"Yeah, squirt," Jannie said, rubbing her little brother's head. "You did good for once."

He flared his nostrils at her, then laughed. "I just made a couple of phone calls. Dad and Uncle John did the rest."

We were starting to discuss whether to contact other family members when the woman of the hour returned. The orderly rolled Nana Mama into the room and two nurses came in, got her back into bed, and told us that Dr. Ames would be along soon to give us the results. I felt helpless seeing my grandmother looking so tiny and forlorn in that hospital bed.

“You look like you’ve been in a fight, Nana,” Ali said.

She made a soft humph noise, then added thickly, “Head hurts.”

“You said that before,” I said.

“Dizzy.”

“You’re dizzy again?”

She nodded and started to close her eyes. Just then, Dr. Sydney Ames rushed in and went straight to my grandmother’s side. “How are you, Ms. Regina?”

“Head hurts. Dizzy. I… where…”

She started to close her eyes again. Dr. Ames turned to me, said, “Can we go into the hall, Alex?”

We walked out the door. The surgeon said, “We found something unexpected. I mean, we were looking for—”

One of the nurses rushed up and whispered a question to Dr. Ames.

“Yes,” Dr. Ames said, nodding. “We want to do it ASAP.”

The nurse hurried into the room. I was getting frustrated and upset.

“What is going on, Sydney?”

“Your grandmother just became a very complicated case,” she said. “It turns out she might have had a stroke before the head trauma.”

“Stroke!”

“It’s probably why she felt dizzy before her fall.”

“But she’s still going to be okay, right?”

Dr. Ames swallowed hard. “The stroke seems to be minor. But we’ve got another problem—the CT scan revealed extreme swelling in her brain beneath the area that hit the brick. Hence her headache and dizziness.”

I was having trouble keeping up. “Just tell me what we need to do.”

The doctor put her hand on my arm and told me the recommended course of action. I admit, I was horrified by what she described for many reasons.

“Would my grandmother even survive something like that?” I asked. “She’s in her nineties.”

“It’s risky. But not doing it might be riskier. At the end of the day, Alex, you have Regina’s medical power of attorney. I don’t know how much she understands at this point, so it’s your call.”

I felt like a great leaden yoke was coming down on my shoulders as we walked back into my grandmother’s room. Her eyes were lazily opening

and shutting.

“Nana,” I said. “I need to tell you something.”

She didn’t reply. Her eyes slowly rolled back in her head, and her whole body began spasming.

OceanofPDF.com

18

AGAINST HIS BETTER JUDGMENT, John Sampson opted not to call child protective services after watching Robert Bogner head back to the Bridge to Nowhere, and he decided not to follow him, not without having any backup. He'd been awake since four thirty a.m. and wanted to be sharp when he went to talk with the high trolls in the morning.

Before going home to his daughter, Sampson stopped by the hospital. He hadn't heard from Alex since the text about the delayed CT scan, and St. Anthony's was only a few minutes out of his way. He parked, went inside, and asked for Regina Cross's room.

His stomach fell when he walked into the room a few minutes later to find the bed empty and Alex, Bree, Jannie, and Ali all with their heads down, apparently praying.

Nana Mama passed.

Alex opened his eyes, which were bloodshot.

"Did she—" Sampson began.

"No," Alex said in a hoarse voice. "But it's bad, brother. Dire."

He explained about the ischemic stroke making her dizzy, leading to her fall onto the bricks and the subsequent brain swelling and bleeding, which had triggered a short seizure.

Nana Mama was being prepped for a craniectomy—surgery to remove a piece of her skull to relieve the pressure in her brain.

"If she dies on the table, they won't resuscitate," Alex said. "If she makes it through, they'll put her in a medically induced coma for a day or so to allow the swelling in the brain to subside, then they'll replace the skull piece and slowly bring her back."

Sampson tried to process what Alex was telling him. "Can someone her age survive something like that?"

"We're about to find out," Bree said.

"How long will the surgery take, Dad?" Ali asked.

“I don’t know, son,” Alex said. “I’m staying, but you should all go home. I’ll send group texts with updates as I get them.”

“Can we call you if we feel like talking?” Jannie asked.

“I’d like that,” he said, then hugged her and kissed her forehead and did the same with Ali and Bree.

“Call if it gets too much, sugar. Call me whenever you want. As many times as you need,” Bree said.

“Will do,” Alex said.

Sampson stuck around a little while after the others left.

“Any updates on the Bridge to Nowhere case?” Alex asked.

Sampson explained about the avgas causing the explosion and the intense fire that engulfed the Audi and the corpse, then said Chief Kane had recommended he look into the culture of the community under the ghost ramp.

“Maybe the killer wasn’t some stranger to the place, you know?”

“He certainly had to have known about the Bridge to Nowhere to use it,” Alex agreed. “Which narrows the field to roughly all of Southeast DC and everyone who drives by the closed-off upper ramp.”

“I also went back and spoke to our young friend Boog.”

He told Alex what the thirteen-year-old had told him: The world beneath the Bridge to Nowhere was divided into tiered societies, with the strongest and most cunning up top. The high trolls guarded their spots fiercely, often using violence.

“He’s seen these fights?”

“He has, and he’s heard of people getting killed by high trolls on the south embankment,” Sampson said. “When it happens, Boog said they wait until dark and then drag the dead guy down to the river, and he floats off toward the Potomac.”

“If someone from the camp was involved in this case, why didn’t that happen last night?”

“Don’t know,” Sampson said. “But I plan on knowing tomorrow. Boog tells me there are two head high trolls. On the south side, it’s a vet named Hawk, and on Boog’s side, the north, it’s a woman named Lainey Locket.”

Cross smiled faintly. “Female head troll?”

“Female head *high* troll.”

OceanofPDF.com

19

BY NINE THAT EVENING, Nana Mama had been in surgery for two hours. I paced. I prayed. Then I called the rest of my family.

With my grandmother's younger sister, Tia, now in a Maryland memory-care facility, I reached out to my aunts on my mother's side, who said they'd start driving north to us from North Carolina first thing the next morning. When I called my brother Charlie, I got a message saying the number was no longer in service.

Finally, I called Nana Mama's only child: my father, Jason Cross, who now lived down in Florida.

He was already distraught when he answered his cell phone. Turned out his wife, Alicia, had had a fall of her own while riding her bike that same morning and had fractured her femur and hip. She, too, was in an operating room.

My dad promised to come as soon as Alicia was stable, and I promised to keep him updated on Nana Mama's condition.

I tried to meditate, tried to find calm, and failed. Every time the surgical suite's double doors opened, my heart lurched into overdrive.

Eventually, I gave a nurse my cell number and asked her to text me when my grandmother was coming out of the OR, then went to the cafeteria to get coffee. On the way, I passed the chapel, thought about it, turned around, and went inside.

I knelt and started to beseech God to save my grandmother. But then I stopped. I found myself unwilling to ask for divine intervention to keep from losing her. Instead, I focused on everything about Nana that I loved, everything about her that I was grateful to have had for so long.

Shutting my eyes, bowing my head, I was suddenly nine again, my life shattered after the death of my mother and disappearance of my father. Feeling abandoned, thrown to the wind, my emotions had cycled between fear and rage for the entire train ride from Starksville, North Carolina, to

Washington, DC. My childhood up to that point had felt like being in a rowboat on the sea in the middle of a typhoon. Chaos and thrill. Pain and loss. Promises made but not kept.

How could life have done this to our family? What had we done so wrong? Those questions had haunted and taunted me the entire trip.

But from that first day, Nana Mama had welcomed me and my three brothers, Blake, Aaron, and Charlie, into her home. She'd given us fried pork chops with onions, green beans with bacon, and corn bread fresh from the oven. Coming from a home where our mom was often too strung out to feed us, my older brothers and I thought we'd gone to heaven.

"Do you always eat like this?" I'd asked.

"I try to cook good food, especially for dinner," Nana Mama told us, smiling. "Good food means every dinner is a celebration of life. And even in tough times like these, I believe in celebrating life."

Later that evening, when the four of us boys went upstairs for bed, she made sure we brushed our teeth and changed into our pajamas.

"You'll all start school soon," she told us when we were in our bedroom and ready for bed. "We will buy you school clothes tomorrow."

"Do we have to wear a tie?" my brother Blake asked.

"To church on Sundays."

"I hate ties."

"Unluckily, you don't make the rules, young Mr. Blake," she'd said and laughed. "Look, a grandmother is supposed to be able to spoil her grandkids. But my job is different. My job is to teach you well so you grow up to be fine young men who would make your mother and father proud."

"I'm not proud of my mother and father," Aaron announced a little hotly.

"I'm not proud of them either," my grandmother said softly. "But that does not have to overwhelm the good memories you have. Because you do have positive memories. So if you're going to blame them for your bad times, you also have to give them credit for the good ones."

My brothers and I said nothing.

"Well, this is something you will do every night as long as you live in my house," she said firmly. "On your knees, young men. And no grumbling."

We did as we were told. Once we were down there, I expected her to lead us in prayer.

Instead, she said, “I want you to close your eyes and thank God for three good things that happened to you in the past few days.”

“Three?” I asked.

“That’s a lot,” Charlie said.

“It’s a beginning,” Nana Mama said, firm again.

“Out loud?” Blake said suspiciously.

“Let’s try quietly for tonight.”

I’d closed my eyes, not sure what to be thankful for. Then I remembered dinner and felt grateful for that. I thought about the way Nana had greeted us at the door, making us feel wanted, and I was happy about that. Then I got stuck. *Well, our train arrived on time and didn’t crash. That was a good thing, right? I mean, I’m still alive, and Nana Mama’s house is the nicest place I’ve ever stayed. And now it’s my home.*

“Alex?”

Startled, I opened my eyes to see Dr. Ames walking into the chapel, looking exhausted.

My heart started racing again when I saw her grim face. I feared the worst.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Dr. Ames said, and she smiled. “Your grandmother made it through the surgery to relieve the pressure in her brain.”

“Oh God, thank you, Sydney.”

She hugged me, said, “My pleasure. And you’ve got the neurosurgeon to thank too; I just scrubbed in. Anyway, she’s in recovery, and we’re running the drugs that will keep her safely in a medically induced coma. And then comes the hardest part.”

“What’s that?”

“We have to wait and see if she can heal.”

OceanofPDF.com

20

BEFORE DAWN THE NEXT day, some twenty-four hours after the Audi and the corpse inside it had been torched on the old roadbed, John Sampson jogged down to the scene of the crime.

It was foggy and damp. The derelict ramp was barely a dark smudge in the low light. Birds fluttered in the underbrush as he passed, and for a panicked moment he thought he smelled skunk.

Sampson, wearing a gray sweatshirt, sweatpants, and running shoes, looked at his watch and picked up his pace. He wanted to be right where Boog was at the same time the explosion happened.

As far as he was concerned, the car had been an aviation-gas-fueled bomb. He wanted to figure out where the liquid fuse was lit.

Sampson spotted the swirl of graffiti that announced the Bridge to Nowhere and glanced at the high corners under the ramp where he'd seen sentries watching the road twice before.

No one was there now, not this early, or if they were, they were lurking back in the shadows. But hopefully, he was going to get where he wanted to go unnoticed.

He put up his sweatshirt hood and ran even faster toward the ramp, wrinkling his nose when he passed a patch of brush that served as a latrine. He slowed when he saw the yellow police tape, then ducked under it and followed the flags on the ground in the growing light to the scorched spot where the Audi had been.

Breathing deep, sweating hard, Sampson stood there watching and listening as the sky paled and the residents of the homeless camp began to wake up. Above him he saw people starting to emerge on both tiered embankments.

He checked his watch again. Boog claimed the fuse had been lit at about a quarter to six.

From 5:40 a.m. to 5:50, Sampson focused on the tall bushes where Boog

said he'd seen the hand torch flare and ignite the fuse to the car bomb. The fog today made visibility worse, but Sampson could understand why the thirteen-year-old had not seen the person responsible for the fire and probably the murder. It had been too dark.

He peered up through the fog and the gloom to the top tier of the south embankment. That was where a vet named Hawk ruled by force. Sampson thought about going up there and finding Hawk but decided to look for the leader of the north bank first, the head high troll who Boog said ruled more by wit than brawn.

She'll know all about Hawk, John reasoned as he began to climb, seeing the shack against the stanchion where Anna Bananas lived with her kids, the tarp and hovel where Boog survived without a mother, and the shadows still shrouding the highest tier.

When Sampson was well past Boog's place, the sun rose above the horizon, sending low-angle rays beneath the bridge and making him squint. He kept climbing, ignoring the suspicious glares he got from several people sitting outside shacks that were better built than the ones lower down.

Sampson climbed onto the upper tier, flushing pigeons and swallows from their nests between the concrete ramp and the rusting steel that supported it. He had to bend over not to hit his head on the underside of the ramp. No one was outside these shelters, which were the most elaborate of all.

The largest was near the middle of the upper tier, rectangular, with a roof and walls of stretched canvas. He walked over but couldn't figure out where the entrance was. Finally, he just knocked on an aluminum crossbar that seemed to be holding the whole thing together.

No answer. He knocked again, said, "I'm looking for Lainey Locket."

Something poked him from behind. Sampson straightened up fast, hit his head on the bottom of the ramp, winced, bent over, put his hand on his crown, and looked behind him.

A long, sharp scrawl of a woman, middle-aged and wild-eyed, stood there holding a pistol-grip shotgun pointed directly at Sampson, the gaping, deadly holes of the double barrel inches away.

"Who's looking?" she said.

OceanofPDF.com

21

JOHN SAMPSON PANICKED A second before reasoning that if the woman really wanted to kill him, he'd be dead already.

"Detective John Sampson," he said, using his deepest authoritarian-cop voice. "DC Metro Police. I have backup working the other wall of the camp. If you do not put that illegal weapon on the ground immediately, I will have to arrest you."

She studied him a long moment. He studied her back.

She was a tall brunette with high cheekbones and dazzling green-blue eyes but gaunt, on the verge of emaciated—at least as far as he could tell under the wildly colorful layers of clothes. Imagine a tornado hitting a donation box and all the clothes inside landing haphazardly on a scarecrow—that was Locket.

She turned the gun around and handed it to Sampson by the barrels. "It's legal, by the way."

"A legal sawed-off shotgun?" Sampson said.

"It's not sawed off," she said. "Barrels are the exact legal limit. A woman has a right to protect herself, and I can't think of a better way to do it than double-aught buckshot at close range. Especially in a place like this."

There was nothing furtive or off about her. She struck him as the antithesis of Anna Bananas.

"You Lainey Locket, then?"

"These days," she said.

"You were someone else before?"

"Wasn't everyone?"

"You have identification?"

She sighed, dug in the folds of her skirt, and came up with a faded, expired Kentucky driver's license with the name Elaine Locket and an address in Centerville. You could barely make out the face in the photo.

“Nothing more recent?”

She shook her head. “Lost my car a long time ago. How about your identification?”

When he held it out, she nodded. “Okay. What do you want?”

He noticed that behind Locket and down the slope, other denizens of the north side of the Bridge to Nowhere were coming out of their shelters, interested, watching, listening. He assumed there were more people behind him doing the same.

“Ms. Locket, is there somewhere we can go to talk privately, or do I need to bring the head high troll down to the station for a formal interrogation?”

Locket gave him an amused smile. “You *are* a detective, aren’t you?”

“It’s amazing what you can learn if you just shut up and listen.”

She thought about that, then said, “Ordinarily, I would take the ride downtown for the free meal involved. But I have things to do later. Let’s go topside. Can I have my shotgun back?”

“Later,” he said. “Once I’ve checked the barrel length.”

As she shrugged and moved by Sampson, Locket looked more irritated than angry, annoyed at his implication that she was incapable of measuring the length of a barrel. He followed her toward the rear of the upper ghost ramp, closer to the Anacostia River.

Roughly parallel to the far end of the stanchion, Locket climbed over several broken slabs of concrete to a hole in the underside of the ramp. Her arms, head, and then shoulders disappeared, leaving just her lace-up cracked leather hunting boots visible before she wriggled all the way up.

Sampson was at least a foot taller than her with shoulders twice as wide, so he had to carefully maneuver his head and upper body through the hole and then reach up and hoist himself onto the top of the ramp. He swatted dust from his hair and eyes as he stood.

Locket gazed at him, then nodded across the river. In the distance, the dome of the Capitol was shining in the early-morning light.

“Most underrated view in the city,” she said. “Best part about being here, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Come up here a lot?”

“Often enough,” she said. “Places like this keep me sane. Off the booze, drugs, and meds. And it’s free. What could be better?”

OceanofPDF.com

22

SAMPSON COULD NOT FIGURE Lainey Locket out. “What happened to you, Lainey?”

Locket hardened a little. “What do you mean?”

“You’re obviously smart,” Sampson said. “So how did you come to be living under the Bridge to Nowhere?”

Locket shrugged and looked away. “Some stories are best left untold.”

“You don’t have anyone to turn to, anyone who’d want to find you?” Sampson asked.

Locket snorted at that. “I haven’t had anyone to rely on in fifteen years, Detective, and at this point, I really don’t want to be found by anyone who might be looking for me.”

“You like being homeless?”

She cocked her head and gazed at him sadly. “Living under the bridge suits me. There’s karma involved.”

“In becoming a troll?”

Locket nodded and looked away again. “I’m fine with being a troll. As I said, living here suits me.”

“I heard you were informally elected head high troll,” he said seriously.

The woman laughed softly. “That’s right. I ran on the trolling-with-dignity ticket. Folks responded because I actually care, and for some reason they come to me with disputes and listen to what I say.”

“Regular Queen Solomon.”

“I try to be fair. I listen to both sides.”

“Not the way Hawk does things on the south side, I hear.”

“It is not,” Locket said, her voice hardening. “Compared to me, Hawk is the Lord of the Flies.”

“Explain that,” Sampson said, though he had an idea from Boog’s description of life on the other embankment.

“It’s dog-eat-dog over there,” Locket said. “Hawk doesn’t care about

anything except Hawk. He certainly suffers upstairs. Drinks. Drugs. Surrounds himself with the same kind of crew."

"What kind is that?" Sampson asked.

"The damaged kind," she said. "You've heard of the collective consciousness?"

"Vaguely," he said.

"Over there on the south bank, it's all about the collective psychosis."

"Did you see the Audi burn?"

"After the fact," she said. "After it blew up, I mean."

"You know Anna Bananas?"

She nodded. "I know Anna Stein and her children. The girl is very smart."

"The kids shouldn't be living like that."

Locket made a humming noise in her throat. "No one should."

"Well, we're in complete agreement on that count," Sampson said. "Ever seen a priest or minister around here?"

Locket's brows knit as she considered the question. "Social workers come by every once in a while. Public health nurses. But I can't say that I've seen any kind of clergyperson here recently. Why?"

"Because there was a witness close to the Audi when it was torched who says that the victim inside it was already dead and that he was wearing a clerical collar."

She rocked back on her heels and then said, "Maybe you better go to the south side, Detective. There's a guy you should talk to over there in Hawk's world who, if I remember right, is homeless because he got thrown out of a seminary."

"You have a name for this seminary reject?"

"No real name. But I think they call him Choir Boy."

OceanofPDF.com

23

I MANAGED TO SLEEP a few hours in a chair by Nana Mama's bedside amid the beeping and whirring of monitors and IV drugs designed to keep her alive while her brain healed.

At seven a.m. Bree came by to sit with her, so I took an Uber home to shower, shave, and change clothes. Ali had made plans to spend all day Saturday with friends, so I was back in the hospital by nine a.m.

"How's she doing?" I asked Bree, handing her a coffee I'd picked up on my way back.

"Beeping along," Bree said. "They took her for another scan about an hour ago. Her vital signs are within normal limits."

"The swelling? The bleeding?"

"Sydney is supposed to come by soon to give us an update," she said just as Dr. Ames came in carrying a chart and smiling.

"The CT scan doesn't show any new ischemic areas," she announced.

"And the swelling from the fall?"

"Not subsiding yet, but not increasing either," she reported. "I expect we'll see the inflammation going down in the next four or five hours. If all goes well, we might try to bring Ms. Regina up out of the coma as soon as this evening. But again, that's if all goes well."

I wanted to hug her, but so did Bree, and she got to the surgeon first. Dr. Ames laughed. "We're not in the clear yet."

"You and the neurosurgeon got her this far," I said, throwing my arms around her after Bree did.

Dr. Ames said more scans would be done over the next ten hours to see if the swelling in my grandmother's brain started to subside. "We'll have a much clearer picture after that."

Not long after Sydney Ames left, John Sampson came in. We brought him up to speed on Nana Mama's condition, and he told us about his early-morning trip to the Bridge to Nowhere.

“Choir Boy?” I said.

“That’s what Locket says they call him. Apparently he was thrown out of a seminary.”

“And what do you know about this Hawk guy?” Bree asked.

“Just that he has mental and addiction issues, surrounds himself with thugs, and runs a *Lord of the Flies* kind of camp on the south embankment.”

“Run checks on him and Locket,” Bree said, her background as a former Metro chief of detectives coming through.

Sampson nodded. “I pulled her fingerprints off her shotgun, which I said I’d return to her this afternoon,” he said. “With luck and a little help, I’ll get Hawk’s prints, and we’ll have a better sense of who we’re dealing with on both sides.”

Bree said, “How come you didn’t want to talk to Hawk right then?”

“I got a pretty strong sense that Hawk was more likely to respond to a show of force than a reasoned argument.”

Bree looked at me. “You’re antsy. Why don’t you go with John and talk to this guy? I’ll stay here until you’re back.”

She was right; I’d been feeling caged sitting here in the hospital room waiting for news. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” Bree said. “And you’ve got me intrigued about this Bridge to Nowhere. Who owns it?”

Sampson said, “I think the District does.”

“Or the feds,” I said. “I’m pretty sure federal highway dollars paid for it.”

“I’ve got my laptop here,” Bree said. “I’ll look into the ghost ramp while you boys go have a chat with Hawk and Choir Boy.”

OceanofPDF.com

24

THE SUN WAS BLAZING in the sky when we returned to the encampment, me for the second time, Sampson for his fourth visit in a little over twenty-four hours.

“You’re getting to be a local,” I said as the ghost ramp and the Bridge to Nowhere graffiti art came into view.

“Destined for a spot on the council of high trolls.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“If there isn’t, there should be. Along with a subcommittee dedicated to ogre diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

I chuckled. My oldest friend had one of the strangest senses of humor I’d ever encountered.

We both wore our badges on chains around our necks as we walked through the brush about a hundred yards from the ramp.

Sampson said quietly, “Upper right corner of the north embankment. Out on that girder. That’s Lainey Locket herself watching us.”

I waited a few seconds, then glanced over and saw a tall, rail-thin woman in wild clothes standing on a girder that stuck out the side of the ramp. Beside her was a familiar figure. “That Anna Bananas under the ramp there too?”

Sampson checked. “Looks like it. Locket said they’re friends.”

“And Hawk lives at the top of the south bank.”

“That’s what I’ve heard,” he said as we passed under the ramp and into its shadow.

The police tape was gone. The flags were gone. All that was left of the Audi was melted tire rubber, scorched mud, and barbecued pavement chunks.

Sampson led us left to the south embankment, got up on the retaining wall, and started to climb. On the lowest tier, an old woman in dirty clothes stood outside a cardboard Amana refrigerator box. She stared right through

us as we passed.

Two tiers up, where the shelters were crowded together, Sampson stopped and muttered, “Oh, man. I knew he was in a bad way, but I never expected to see him *here*.”

I peered around Sampson and saw a disheveled man in his early forties sitting by a patched yellow tent about thirty feet from us. He had a blanket around his shoulders and was huddled over a camp stove, stirring something in a little pot.

My heart went out to the guy. I recognized him too. He’d done two tours in Iraq with the US Army before joining the Metro PD, and he did well his first five years with the force, with a career on a steep uphill trajectory. But two weeks after making detective, he’d had some kind of mental breakdown and turned violent, beating a suspect in public. He’d been suspended and was eventually fired for his increasingly erratic behavior, which resulted in multiple cases being compromised. That was the last I’d heard of him.

“Sean?” Sampson said. “Sean Brundage?”

The man twisted his head toward us, his eyes bloodshot and unfocused. “Whoever you are, Sean’s not home.”

As we approached, Brundage picked up a pint of vodka, poured half of it into the pot, and set the bottle down. With shaky hands, he poured the pot’s contents into a tin cup.

Sampson took a step closer and squatted down. A family of four watched us warily from the shelter just beyond Brundage’s tent. “It’s John Sampson. Alex Cross is here too. You remember us?”

His eyes seemed to focus. “I remember. Whaddya want?”

Sampson said, “You know Hawk? Lives on the south side?”

Brundage nodded. “Screwed-up dude. He’s former Special Forces. Three tours in Afghanistan. Seems perfectly sane when you meet him, but he can get scary fast. He was in the shit for years.” He took another drink from his cup and shuddered. “He thinks he talks to the spirits of everyone he killed over there.”

“Ever hear of him killing anyone when he wasn’t in Afghanistan?” I asked.

“Nothing more than rumors, man.”

“We’re investigating the car that burned up here yesterday. You see it?”

Brundage drank from his cup, then shook his head. “Slept through it. They were pulling it away when I got up.”

“Kid on the other side says there was someone wearing a clerical collar in the car,” I said.

Brundage got a seen-it-all look on his face and shrugged. “Another of life’s tragedies.”

Sampson said, “Do you know this guy Choir Boy?”

“Hawk talks to him,” Brundage said. “Weird kid. Weird eyes. Dead eyes. Like he’s got no soul, brother. Lot of that going on around here.” The former cop stared at the ground in silence, finished what was in his cup, then poured the rest of the vodka into the steaming pot.

“Sean,” Sampson said after a moment, “can we take you somewhere? Get you some help?”

He shook his head angrily. “Just leave me be. There’s no help for me out there, man. My soul left the station a long, long time ago.”

OceanofPDF.com

25

JOHN SAMPSON AND I left Sean Brundage reluctantly. As we climbed the south embankment, part of me wanted to go back to him and force him to seek help.

The poor bastard was clearly suffering and in a destructive downward spiral. In my experience, the closer people got to the bottom, the more trapped they felt and the fewer options they thought they had, and eventually they reached the final stage of despair: helplessness. For many, this perceived inability to influence the present and future led them to believe there was no purpose to their existence other than suffering, at which point death appeared to be a less painful option than life.

But as much as I wanted to intervene, I knew that the only way for Brundage to heal would be for him to *ask* for healing. Without the ask, I'd found that addicts and the mentally ill continued to spiral down toward a miserable, predictable end.

The second they asked for help, however, their descent reversed. The ask might not result in a full recovery of mind, body, and spirit, but it was the pivotal point of change in a human being who saw no way out.

Sampson halted his climb, interrupting my train of thought.

He put his right hand on the butt of his service weapon. I did the same, suddenly struck by a premonition of extreme danger. I craned my head around, trying to spot the source of the menace that felt so palpable, it sent an acid taste up the back of my throat.

To our left, a young couple with a baby were sitting on sleeping bags outside a tent. The mom was breastfeeding a fussy infant. The dad was staring a thousand yards or more into the distance, maybe seeking a better fate.

To our right along the tier, three older women were cooking over a camp stove, laughing at some joke and doing their best to ignore us. On the uppermost tier, a girl in her mid-teens appeared. Denim shorts, black T-

shirt, and flip-flops. Sandy-blond pigtails. A yellow ball cap. She barely gave Sampson and me a glance as she ducked her head under the steel girders and beams that supported the ramp.

Then I spotted him, the head high troll of the south side of the Bridge to Nowhere.

Hawk was built like an aging action hero with long, jet-black hair tied into a braid and a face that looked like a sculpture made of broken concrete blocks. The man was massive but paunchy. He wore a black tank top advertising a gym in Dubai, but his belly sagged over the waist of his filthy shorts.

His movements were stiff, as if his joints or old wounds pained him. But his posture—knees flexed, balance forward on the balls of his feet, hands never leaving the plane of his hips—and the way his head swiveled about, searching for threats, all screamed *warrior*.

Hawk had seen us coming. He narrowed his eyes as if he were preparing for battle or maybe doing a Dirty Harry impression.

Sampson was a hell of a warrior himself. He stopped below Hawk, right hand still on his weapon, his left lifting his badge so it could not be missed.

“Detective John Sampson, Metro PD Homicide, Mr. Hawk,” Sampson said. “This is Alex Cross, my partner. We’d like to ask you a few questions if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind,” Hawk said evenly. “But do what you gotta do.”

“We fine coming up?” Sampson asked.

“You’re good there,” the man replied. “I’ve always had a thing for the high ground.”

“Hawk your real name?”

“Handle,” he said. “Alejandro Rodriguez, age forty-four, address—you’re looking at it.”

“I hear you were Special Forces. What teams?”

“Delta for seven years, JSOC two,” Rodriguez said.

I stepped up beside Sampson. “How’d you end up here?”

“By way of Kandahar, an IED, a traumatic brain injury, rage, violence, a court-martial, a dishonorable discharge, and a general inability to cope with life stateside.”

“And yet you’re in control of your faculties enough that you were chosen to lead this side of the camp.”

Rodriguez laughed caustically. “Who said I was chosen, Detectives?”

OceanofPDF.com

26

“WE HEARD IT’S PRETTY dog-eat-dog over here,” said John Sampson.

“Can be.” Alejandro Rodriguez shrugged. “And I’m just a big dog. Being anything else would insult my basic nature. Others can feel my canine sensibilities, and they either listen to me or give me a wide berth, which is smart because things do get to me.”

“PTSD?” I guessed.

“That too,” he said agreeably. “But, you know, when I can find them, I microdose shrooms. Seems to help. Anyway, when it comes right down to it, the whole head-high-troll thing means little beyond ensuring I have a good place to sleep at night.”

I said, “Probably not a great idea to be dosing yourself, Hawk.”

He shrugged again. “Says you.”

Sampson said, “You’re not tripping now, are you, Mr. Rodriguez?”

“Gimme a break, man,” he said, frowning. “I just woke up.”

“What time did you wake up yesterday?”

He had to think about that. “Ten forty-five. Checkout was eleven.” He hadn’t been here, he explained. Once a week, if he had the cash, Rodriguez paid for a bed and a shower in a no-tell place called the Fall Flower Motel, a fleabag joint about two miles away across the Maryland line. When he’d heard the forecast for violent thunderstorms the other day, he’d decided to spend the night at the motel.

“Can anyone put you there?” I asked.

“Freaky-thin gal at the front desk and the maid, plus they got cameras facing the parking lot. I stayed in my room after I showered, did a microdose, smoked a little herb, drank a little Jimmy Beam, and watched LA play Dallas in hoops.”

“Who won?” Sampson was testing him.

“Lakers,” he said, sounding disgusted. “That guy Dončić is an animal. I can’t believe the Mavericks let him go.”

“We agree on one thing,” Sampson said. “When did you find out about the car burning with a body inside?”

Rodriguez thought about that. “I dunno—noon? By the time I got back, the whole place was taped off and you guys were putting little flags in the mud. Whole thing gave me the feeling, you know.”

“What feeling?”

“The kind you get sometimes when you’re totally connected to the mission, to the universe, and the spirit moves you, sees more than you, and you have a higher understanding. When you realize things seem good, but they aren’t good, they’re downright spooky.”

Sampson and I exchanged a glance, then shook our heads, wondering what kind of microdose hallucination Hawk had been having.

Rodriguez peered off as if in awe. “I saw that burned car down there and them taking the body out, and all I could think about was that guy shot and burned two weeks ago in back of a squat off New York Avenue.”

“I don’t know that case. Enlighten me,” John said.

“Didn’t see the body myself, but there’s like a street telegraph among us unhoused folks. Since I heard the story about the dude off New York Avenue from three different sources, I figured it was true.”

“A homeless guy was burned to death?” I asked.

“I heard he was shot first, then his body was lit on fire.”

“Not a priest?”

Hawk looked surprised. “I don’t think so. Why?”

“One witness said that the victim he saw in the car here was wearing a cleric’s collar.”

Sampson said, “Who was the first person to tell you about the victim from New York Avenue?”

Rodriguez thought about it. “Must have been Choir Boy. Yeah, that’s right. It was definitely Choir Boy. He said he saw the crispy critter there himself.”

OceanofPDF.com

27

JOHN SAMPSON AND I returned to St. Anthony's Hospital around three thirty that afternoon. Bree looked up and smiled at us from her seat beside my grandmother's bed.

"Good news," she said. "Nana Mama had another CT scan about an hour ago. We aren't out of the woods yet, but Dr. Ames says the swelling is definitely going down."

I hugged her and gave Sampson a fist bump.

"Told you," he said. "The toughest old lady who ever lived."

"When are they going to wake her up?" I asked Bree.

"Fully? Tomorrow morning maybe."

"I thought Sydney said tonight if the third scan looked good."

"They took her off the ventilator," Bree said. "But Sydney's concerned about an irregular heartbeat that's been happening every hour or so, and she wants to see that stabilize before they wake Nana up completely, so she's still heavily sedated. Dr. Ames said Nana might be able to hear us, so we should talk to her, encourage her."

I went to Nana Mama and held her hand. "You can do this, Nana. We're here for you."

From the foot of her bed, Sampson said, "Everyone's rooting for you, Nana."

"Hopefully they'll bring her out of this soon," Bree said. "In the meantime, how'd the return trip to the bridge go?"

We started by telling her about Sean Brundage. Bree was even more heartbroken than we were—she'd been chief when Brundage was promoted to detective and had witnessed his initial decline. She'd also been part of the review team that had suspended him after his mental deterioration and subsequent violent acts.

"My heart breaks for his wife and kids," Bree said, shaking her head. "They're out in Bowie these days, I think."

“His wife had ample reason to leave him,” Sampson said. “But I’m sure it would crush her if she knew how he was living.”

“*Existing* is more like it,” I said.

Next, we told Bree about the other crime that Hawk, aka Alejandro Rodriguez, had mentioned, the homeless man who’d been killed and his body burned. Sampson and I had gotten in touch with the precinct covering New York Avenue and found out more details.

“Happened two weeks ago,” Sampson said. “Behind a condemned apartment building east of New York Avenue where a bunch of homeless folks were squatting until the wrecking ball came. That morning one of them woke up, smelled something awful, looked outside, and saw a body smoldering.”

Two veteran homicide detectives had caught the case. “Tommy Hayes and Judy Winthrop,” I said.

Bree rolled her eyes. “Let me guess—they didn’t push it very far.”

“Correct,” I said. “No ID on the body. No witnesses to the killing—he was shot in the head—or the corpse getting set on fire. Or at least, no witnesses willing to come forward and talk about it with the police, so the detectives back-burnered the case.”

“But cause of death was the gunshot?”

“Right,” Sampson said. “Same as the John Doe from the Bridge to Nowhere.”

“Same combustible used in the immolation?”

“We’ve asked for that test to be done.”

“Any other commonalities?”

“A guy who goes by Choir Boy and lives under the ghost ramp off and on told Rodriguez that he was in the New York Avenue squat near where the first homeless person was shot and burned. No government name known yet,” I said, anticipating Bree’s next question. “Described as in his mid-twenties, angry. Supposedly became homeless after being thrown out of a seminary. Anyway, Hawk said Choir Boy told him he saw the burned body behind the squat and that Choir Boy was definitely under the ramp yesterday.”

“Rodriguez saw this guy near the crime scene himself?”

“Swears to it. And he claims that Choir Boy was acting stranger than usual. Last time Hawk saw him was around one p.m. heading toward the

river.”

Bree asked, “What’s your take on this Hawk character?”

“Complicated man,” Sampson offered. “He came off as relatively stable in our talk, all things considered. But the other people we’ve spoken to—Sean Brundage, this kid Boog, and Lainey Locket, the other leader type in the area—they all say Hawk’s wildly up and down. And that he’s got a hair-trigger temper and serious fighting skills.”

Bree thought about that. “In my research, I learned that there’s a hedge fund trying to buy the land. They want to tear the ramp down and build a little neighborhood, restaurants and high-end apartment buildings with views of the river and the Capitol.”

“Leaving the citizens under the Bridge to Nowhere with literally nowhere to go,” I said before something struck me. “Could you do me a favor when you get a chance? If I send you the address of the squat near New York Avenue, can you look into who owns it?”

“Sure. I’m going down to the cafeteria to get something to eat. I’ll start after.”

“Bring me back a Caesar salad with chicken?”

Bree nodded, then looked at Sampson. “John?”

“I’ll come along, see what they’ve got.”

They left with promises to be back soon, and I settled into the chair next to Nana Mama’s bed. I reached through the railing and took her hand again.

“I hope you can hear me, Nana,” I said, choking up at just how small and insubstantial her hand felt in mine. “I hope you can feel all the love here for you and for your life, everything you’ve meant to people and stood for. We’re praying for you. We’re—”

The monitor tracking her heart began to beep wildly.

“Nurse!” I yelled, jumping up. “Nurse!”

But before I even got to the door, the beeping stopped, and by the time the nurse on duty reached the bedside, her heartbeat had returned to normal.

“She’s a fighter,” the nurse said and patted my arm before leaving.

I gazed down at my tiny grandmother and felt wonder at her spirit.

“How many times in your life have you beaten the odds?” I asked her fondly. “How many times have you cheated death, old woman?”

Would she do it again?

OceanofPDF.com

28

REGINA HOPE CROSS'S WORLD turned from total blackness to murky shadows to bubbling pale gray; she felt as if she were weakly swimming up out of the depths of a winter sea, tugged this way and that by the tides.

She rose close to but did not break the surface. And she did not open her eyes. But she began to smell things. Cleansers and then something that was more familiar, though she could not identify it.

She began to hear things too. Muffled sounds from above the surface of the foaming ocean in which she swam.

A voice. A male voice that went with the smell. Though his words came to her garbled and slurred, she felt the love in his voice, and she understood at some deep level what he was saying.

How many times have you cheated death, old woman?

The current stirred by his question overtook her, but instead of rushing her forward, it pulled her back through time.

On a sweltering-hot afternoon in June, eight-year-old Regina Hope sat near the back of a Greyhound bus. She was wearing her Sunday best and clutching a cardboard box that held everything she owned.

Her little brother, Wayne, had recently died. And her mother was having "nervous issues" that left her unable to care for Regina and her four-year-old sister, Tia.

Tia went to stay with one of their neighbors in Starksville, North Carolina, but Regina's relatives put her on a bus and sent her off to live with Bessie Hope, her father's cousin, who had agreed to let Regina live at her place while her mother recovered.

Bessie would take care of her. Everyone told her that.

But when Regina got off the bus, there was no one waiting for her. So she went inside the bus station and sat and waited.

After two hours, Regina realized no one was coming. She almost cried, but a voice in her head said, *Be strong, girl. You'll get nowhere by falling apart.*

Regina had Bessie Hope's address in her purse along with two Hershey bars. She ate one of them, then found a police officer and asked for directions.

It turned out that the apartment was less than two miles from the station, straight north. Regina walked as the sun began to sink and throw shadows off the tenement stairs she passed.

She reached the address and found number 4 on the first floor. She could hear music playing inside, so she knocked. She had to knock again before the door swung open.

A muscular man wearing shorts but no shirt answered. He had a cigarette in his mouth and a beer in his hand. "What you want?" he asked.

"I'm Regina Hope," she told him. "I'm looking for my dad's cousin Bessie."

"Bessie ain't here," the man said.

The girl blinked. "Can I come in and wait until she gets back?"

"Nope."

Regina felt a surge of emotion in her throat. "I'm supposed to be staying here with her."

"Heard that, but Bessie never ran it by me, and this is my place, so you go on and scat."

"Where do I go?" she asked, unable to stop the tears now.

"I don't know, and I don't care," the man said, and shut the door.

Regina wandered back to the bus station as darkness fell. She was hungry and thirsty and scared when she crawled behind a trash bin outside the station and slept with her head on her box.

Shortly after dawn, a cop found her. When Regina told him her story, he bought her a sandwich and a Coke.

"You're lucky it was me who found you," said the officer, whose name was Gabriel Faulks. "I know some good people."

Officer Faulks called Sandy and Linus Calvin to come to the bus station. Linus was a plumber, and Sandy cooked for the priests at St. Anthony's Catholic Church. She and Linus were a warm couple who hadn't been able to have children of their own, but as Linus declared with a big kindly laugh,

“We see it as a command from our Lord to take in strays.”

“That’s right,” his wife agreed. “Can you read and write, Regina?”

“I know my ABCs and my numbers, ma’am.”

“Well, we’ll build on that,” Sandy said and put her arm around the girl’s shoulders. “You’ll be reading books in no time. There’s nothing grander in life than reading, dear. If there’s one thing I can teach you, it’s what a good book can do for you.”

OceanofPDF.com

29

THE SWELLING IN NANA MAMA'S brain continued to abate, Dr. Sydney Ames told us, but because of the episodes of arrhythmia, Nana Mama would stay heavily sedated for a second night.

Bree went home around nine that evening after telling me that she had hit a wall of shell companies when she tried to figure out who owned the condemned apartment building on New York Avenue behind which the first burned body had been found. Sampson had gone home earlier to be with his daughter, Willow.

I sat by Nana Mama's side, bowed my head, and talked to her about some of our best moments. I told her how happy and proud I'd always been to have her support and love and how much it meant to me to have her there with me when I graduated from high school, then Georgetown, and then the master's and PhD programs at Johns Hopkins.

She was there in the front row of both my weddings. Afterward, Nana was the first one to hug me in celebration. She was always the first.

"Nothing good in my life would have happened without you," I choked out. "None of it."

I could have sworn I heard her sigh. I looked up at her, but she didn't move. I slept fitfully in the chair beside her for the second night in a row, waking every time a nurse came in to check her vitals, then dozing off again, cycling through the hours before dawn.

My cell phone buzzed at five a.m. with a call from Sampson.

"Kind of early for a check-in," I said, yawning. "There's no change, and I haven't slept for more than—"

"Sorry to hear that, but we've got another torched body near a homeless encampment. They called us first. Do you want in, or do I pass it to those detectives at the other precinct, Hayes and Winthrop?"

I glanced over at my grandmother. Sydney said she'd be by around ten a.m., which gave me five hours. "I'm in."

“Grab you out front in ten minutes.”

The crime scene was in far Northeast DC, less than ten blocks from the squat where the first torched body had been found and three miles as the crow flies from the Bridge to Nowhere. The homeless encampment was strung out through a brushy, narrow ravine between a row of old warehouses and the back of a seedy commercial street.

We were greeted by a young patrol officer, Gayle Rowland, and followed her to the crime scene. As we ducked under the yellow police tape, I was aware that there were silhouettes of people in the trees at the edge of the ravine, watching us silently.

“No one saw anything?” I asked.

“They say no. And no one heard anything except the music from the club until it closed at two thirty a.m., which is normal.”

The burned body lay in charred weeds and bushes between the lip of the ravine and the gravel parking lot of a tool-rental place. On one side was the Avid Eyeball, a strip club, and on the other was a vape store.

“Who found the body?” Sampson asked.

“The late-night manager at the Avid Eyeball,” Rowland said. “She says she exited the back door and was about to lock it when she saw flames and then the body and called 911.”

“When was that?”

“Call came in to dispatch at three forty-four.”

“Where is the manager now?”

“Home,” Rowland said. “Sleeping. I have all her contacts and a picture of her ID.”

“There have to be security cameras on all these places,” I said to Sampson as we greeted Lillian Danville, an excellent criminalist, who was examining the victim.

We put on nitrile gloves and bent down closer to the body.

“What can you tell us so far?” I asked.

“Victim is female and young,” Danville said. “I’m guessing mid-teens?”

A teenager? I couldn’t help thinking of my own kids. I bowed my head and said a quick prayer for the victim.

Whatever accelerant was used, it had not fully done its job. Though her

body was fireplace-black from her lower neck to her toes, the skin on her face was bubbled, more purple than red, and crisscrossed with livid fissures from the heat. Single tufts of shriveled, stubby blond hair jutted out from her head. The scalp beneath those tufts was blistered and beet red but not charred the way the skin on the body in the Audi had been.

Her mouth was wide open, her lips and mouth singed black.

"She had to have been alive when she was set on fire. Her tongue and the roof of her mouth are charred," Danville told us.

"She breathed it in." I shivered, hating the idea.

"So she wasn't shot," said Sampson.

"She was," the criminologist said. She crouched down and gestured to a tuft on the right side of the victim's head, about three inches above her ear. Danville moved the hair aside with a tongue depressor and showed us the wound.

"Maybe she was shot after she started burning," Sampson suggested. "Could have been to put her out of her misery."

"Somehow I don't think our perp is big on acts of mercy, John," I muttered.

"Detectives?"

I looked up to see Officer Gayle Rowland approaching.

"Found a handbag over there in the bushes," she said, gesturing behind her. "Looks too fancy for the folks living in the ravine."

"I'll go look," I said. The officer brought me over to a scrubby bush. I spotted the black and red bag, photographed the purse with my phone from several angles, then pulled it out.

"Fairly heavy." I opened it and saw a cell phone, three lipsticks, three condoms, a billfold containing a wad of hundred-dollar bills, and an Ohio driver's license belonging to Corey McGovern. The photo showed a bright-eyed young woman with dirty-blond hair.

"Twenty-two?" I said, looking at the dates on the license and then at the picture. "And the ID was issued two months ago? Nah, this is a fake. I guarantee it. She's no more than fifteen."

Officer Rowland peered at the ID and nodded. "Unless she's like one of those actresses in their twenties who look young enough to play high-school students."

I studied the photo, feeling haunted all of a sudden and not knowing

why.

“You all right, Detective Cross?” Rowland asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel like I’ve seen Miss Corey McGovern somewhere before, but for the life of me, I can’t place her.”

OceanofPDF.com

30

I HANDED JOHN SAMPSON the ID, and he studied Corey McGovern's picture. "No way she's twenty-two," he said.

"More like fifteen, sixteen," I said. "But that ID is probably good enough to fool most liquor-store owners."

"And maybe strip-club managers," he said, still staring at the picture.

"Do you recognize her? There's something about her that reminds me of someone."

"Fresh-faced. Innocent. And yeah, there's something about her that's familiar."

The medical examiner arrived to join the CSI techs, and we let the issue of the victim's identity slide for the moment. Sampson organized a canvass of the people living in the ravine.

The tool-rental store would open in an hour, the vape store at ten, and the Avid Eyeball at four p.m. Whatever the security cameras might have picked up would have to wait.

While the ME worked, I tried to see if I could get the cell phone we'd found in the purse to unlock. The phone's screen saver was a selfie of the same girl in the ID, heavily made up with lipstick and mascara and eyeliner. I looked at the birth date on the driver's license and tried a couple of combinations of the month and day, with no luck. After a few failed attempts, I was temporarily blocked and had to wait to try again.

Sampson finished talking to someone down in the ravine, then climbed up and walked over to me.

"No one in the ravine has heard of Choir Boy," he reported. "And there are no teenage girls living down there who might be our vic."

Before replying, I glanced down and noticed that the block on the phone had lifted. I'd almost given up. But for the hell of it, I tried again with the birth date on the ID but adding seven to the year.

"I'm in!" I exclaimed, showing Sampson the cell phone.

“How’d you get that open?”

“Dumb luck.”

“Always better than intelligent misfortune.”

“You’re a very strange guy, you know that?”

“Always,” he said, and grinned. “Who is she? Check the settings.”

I thumbed the settings icon. The screen jumped to life.

“Phone belongs to Corey McGovern,” I said. “Same name as on the driver’s license, clearly the same girl.”

“Pictures? Social media?”

I backed out of the settings screen, found the photos icon, and tapped it. Hundreds of pictures. I went to the most recent, another selfie of McGovern grinning but looking far younger than the image on her screen saver.

The time stamp was the day before. There was a river below her in the background.

She wasn’t wearing any makeup in the photo. But it was the hairstyle that shocked me and triggered a memory. I turned the phone back to Sampson. “I know her now. So do you.”

He frowned and stared at the screen. “Are you sure?”

“The pigtails, John. The yellow ball cap.”

He blinked, looked into the distance, then back at the phone, and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. This is the same girl who walked across the top tier of the south embankment right before we saw Hawk yesterday. You think Corey was visiting Hawk?”

“I’m thinking we better have a second Hawk talk and—” I stopped abruptly. I’d been thumbing through pictures on the victim’s phone and froze when I saw one from four days ago.

“What?”

I held up the phone to Sampson. The photo was of Corey McGovern sitting on an upside-down five-gallon bucket. Hawk was standing on one side of her. And a taller, younger, and heavier man stood on her other side. He wore a ball cap, dark sunglasses, shorts, and a gray T-shirt with two words emblazoned across the chest in faded ornate calligraphy:

31

JOHN SAMPSON RAN HIS tongue along the inside of his cheek before clucking in disgust. “Makes you wonder what’s going on behind Choir Boy’s sunglasses, you know? Is he leering down at her, plotting this?”

I put the dead girl’s phone into an evidence bag and used a marker to note the time and place of discovery and my badge number. I nodded and said, “We need to find this Choir Boy guy ASAP. And I’m more interested than ever in what got him booted out of a seminary.”

“We need a name,” Sampson said as a pickup truck pulled into the parking lot.

A bulldozer of a woman in khaki pants, a blue polo, and a ball cap advertising the tool-rental facility came out of the truck and strode toward the Metro crime scene van.

“You can’t park here!” she shouted, waving her arms wildly at Lillian Danville. “I have customers coming! This is still a goddamn place of business, despite whatever the hell has happened back in that ravine now!”

I told Sampson I’d handle it and went quickly to the confrontation. Danville was holding up her nitrile-gloved hands and saying nothing as the woman continued to rant.

“I call the police like every other day because of the damn useless people back there, and no one does a thing! They take dumps in my parking lot at night! I got to clean it up every damned morning! And—”

“Ma’am,” I said, sharply enough to stop her yelling. I held up my credentials. “This is a murder scene. So please step back from my fellow officer and take a few deep breaths or you’ll be charged with obstruction of justice.”

She gave me a look of deep frustration but did in fact step back. She stared at the ground, trembling slightly.

“Hey there,” I said in a friendlier tone. I went over to her and saw MIMI WALLACE sewn on the front of her polo. “Ms. Wallace, can you take a walk

with me while you calm yourself?”

Wallace crossed her arms but nodded grudgingly and walked with me to the front of the rental operation. I said nothing until we reached the door.

“You better now, Ms. Wallace?”

“No, Detective, I am not,” she said, her voice shaking. “I got two kids, both down with colds, and I’m the manager here and I got no one to cover for me. And this constant thing with the folks in that ravine—I know they got a raw deal, but I am just getting tired of it.”

I said, “I completely understand. You’ve had a lot of problems here, Ms. Wallace?”

She wiped a tear from her cheek. “Every day. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve called the police. Sometimes they come. Sometimes they just drive through the parking lot and that’s all! I try to get them to look at the security footage for what goes on back there at night, but they just shrug it off.”

“You have footage from last night?” I asked.

The woman rolled her head, then shook it. “I shut it off.”

My heart sank. “Why?”

The tears came again. “I’m a God-fearing woman, and they’re crapping in the open like dogs, having sex in the open like dogs, fighting like dogs, plus drinking and smoking meth. I just could not look at that kind of thing anymore, so I turned the rear camera off.”

“Front camera?”

“No, that was on,” she said. “But you never see things like that out front.”

“Just the same,” I said, “can I take a look, Ms. Wallace?”

“I’m not in trouble?”

“Not for turning off a camera to protect your sanity,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping at her tears before letting me into the shop.

She led me to a back room with a desk and a computer and brought up the video footage from the night before. I had her start at midnight and run the film in semi–fast forward. Buses and cars went by. A few of the vehicles turned into the Avid Eyeball’s parking lot, but more cars and pickups left the strip club the later it got.

At twelve fifty-nine a.m., a Toyota Prius pulled over just beyond the turn

into the Avid Eyeball's lot, and a waifish figure wearing a short skirt, high heels, and a light-colored hoodie climbed out. She turned and walked a little awkwardly toward the club, as if unsure of her balance in the high heels, pulling back her hood as she did.

"Pigtails," I said, freezing the frame.

Wallace said, "She the victim?"

"Believe so."

The rental-shop manager leaned over and tapped a key. The image blew up and was much clearer than I'd expected.

"That girl's too young to be wearing that much makeup," Wallace said disapprovingly.

"She was likely killed behind your shop," I said.

The manager shook her head. "The Eyeball's cameras should pick her up, but no one'll be over there until the afternoon. That hellhole opens at four."

OceanofPDF.com

32

IN THE CONFUSION OF bubbling grays and deeper blues, in the foaming waves in which she was buffeted, Regina Hope Cross's sedated mind rolled, sank, and drifted with the currents and events of her life, each recalled with small typhoons of emotion that made her old heart race.

A wave built in the old woman's subconscious, crested, and rolled once more, and with it came a rush of churning memories.

She saw herself saying a bittersweet goodbye to the Calvins, who'd treated her kindly and who sent her off with her new favorite book, about a pig named Freddy who was a barnyard detective. Regina could read every word now, and the words triggered things in her, most of all delight that every time she opened a book, she felt like she was setting out on an adventure.

She saw herself when she was back in Starksville, where her mother's sister Eleanor now lived with them. Aunt Eleanor was a widow who'd come home after twenty years of teaching in Florida. Aunt Eleanor picked up where Sandy Calvin had left off, deepening her niece's fondness for reading but also teaching her how to master a subject.

In the next wave of memory, Regina was sixteen and—even though Aunt Eleanor thoroughly disapproved—swirling in the throes and heartaches of first love. She saw herself outside a school dance in Starksville, dressed in a white blouse and a modest skirt she'd made herself, peering anxiously into the night, hoping against hope that her boyfriend would appear as he'd promised.

Lying there in her hospital bed as the sedatives began to wear off, the old woman relived the suffering of that particular evening of broken promises.

Then her mind skipped forward.

Regina saw a hotel door opening and almost swooned at the sensation of love erupting through her when a strong hand appeared holding a bouquet

of yellow roses, her favorite.

Even in her semiconscious state and despite all the decades that had passed since that night, Nana Mama heard her love's voice clearly, the soft, growling timbre of it, the easy pace, the words and perfect phrases rolling off his tongue like silky jazz.

"As requested, flowers for my bride, the beautiful Regina. A king always looks out for his queen."

OceanofPDF.com

33

SAMPSON AND I LEFT the crime scene to the technicians and Corey McGovern's charred body to the medical examiner, and after I registered with the techs for chain of custody of her phone—which I wanted to take with me so I could dig deeper into the girl's life—we went back to the hospital.

When we arrived, Sampson went to the restroom, and I went to see Nana Mama. I was surprised to find my oldest child, Damon, sitting in the chair next to Nana Mama's bed, looking at her with tears in his eyes.

"Hey," I said, smiling. "I thought you were still in Chapel Hill."

Damon was in a graduate program at the University of North Carolina, a good five-hour drive away.

He got up, came over, and hugged me tight. "Finished my work for the semester yesterday, packed up, and caught a late ride with a friend. I wanted to be here when they wake her up, which the doctor said might be in a few hours."

"Glad you came," I said, hugging him back.

"Of course."

We broke our hug. Damon wiped at his eyes and turned to my grandmother.

"I've always thought of her as larger than life, Dad," he said, his voice thick. "But she looks so small."

"Like a little bird," I said, putting my arm around his big, broad shoulders. Damon had at least three inches on my six two these days. "But do not count that old lady out. She's as tough as anyone I've ever known."

"Tougher," Damon agreed.

Bree walked in holding a cardboard tray of coffee, and Sampson was right behind her. Rather than trying to squeeze everyone into Nana Mama's ICU room, the four of us moved down to a little area for families. While Damon brought Sampson up to speed on his life, I told Bree about the case

we’d caught that morning.

“How old did you say the victim was?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen and on the street,” she said, shaking her head sadly.

“I think. Here, look.”

I got out the evidence bag containing Corey McGovern’s smartphone. I put on gloves and keyed in the passcode I’d discovered.

“Lot of pictures,” I said, showing her a few. “These are fairly recent.”

“Anyone report her missing yet?”

“No,” I said. “But John and I think we saw her yesterday morning under the Bridge to Nowhere. We’re pretty sure she was coming from seeing Hawk.” I scrolled over to the picture showing McGovern, Rodriguez, and the mysterious Choir Boy.

“Huh,” Bree said. “Got extra gloves?”

I reached into an inner coat pocket where I often carried a few and handed her a pair.

“May I?” she asked after putting them on.

I handed her the phone and watched as she closed the photo album and pulled up Instagram. It immediately jumped to Corey McGovern’s page and a post from the day before, a selfie of her wearing the same clothes we’d seen her in yesterday afternoon.

McGovern was standing on a large manicured lawn, probably a park, though I could not place which one. Her yellow cap was on backward. Her pigtails were sticking out. She was making a goofy face at the camera.

“‘Make way for a positive day, y’all,’” Bree said, reading the caption aloud.

“Yeah.”

Bree scrolled down through more selfies. Picture after picture on Instagram showed the girl in front of swanky restaurants, trendy nightclubs, and other fancy settings around Washington, DC. The captions suggested that she visited these places often.

McGovern wore a simple black cocktail dress and heels in most of those photos. In one pic, however, she was dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt, and white sneakers and was sitting on the front stoop of a beautiful town house on a leafy street with brick sidewalks.

The caption read *No place like home* and was tagged as Georgetown.

“She’s projecting a fantasy life,” I said.

“Like most people on social media do to one degree or another. You’re positive that you saw her under the bridge yesterday?”

“If it wasn’t Corey, it was her twin sister,” I said, then glanced at my watch and saw it was almost noon. “Damon was saying Nana won’t be all the way off the drugs until later this afternoon?”

“Around five,” Bree said, nodding.

“I’ll be back by four, but text if she starts waking up sooner,” I said, putting the phone back into the evidence bag.

“Where are you going now?”

“Back to the bridge and its trolls.”

OceanofPDF.com

34

IT WAS NEARLY ONE in the afternoon and brutally hot and humid for May when John Sampson and I climbed out of our car and once again walked toward the ghost ramp and the desperate denizens living beneath the Bridge to Nowhere.

As before, sentries posted in the high corners of the north and south embankments watched us as we approached. For the first time, I saw hand signals exchanged on the north side, the one run by Lainey Locket, and I thought I heard a whistle come from one of the watchers on Hawk's aerie.

Sampson and I had discussed going straight to the high troll of the south. But then we saw Anna Bananas in the shade of the ghost ramp, sitting on the retaining wall at the base of the north embankment.

"Two coppers going up, up, up," she said when she saw us.

"How are you, Anna?" I asked gently.

"Been better. Been worse."

"The kids?"

She smiled a little. "Off with Boog. His mother's due back, you know."

"Heard that," Sampson said.

I got out my phone and called up the first picture we'd seen on Corey McGovern's Instagram account, the one where she'd been making the goofy face with the caption *Make way for a positive day, y'all*.

"Do you know her?" I asked. "Corey McGovern?"

Anna squinted, studied. "Pop-pop-pop. Runaway, maybe. Emma, Emma, my girl, would know. She's not here now."

"When will Emma come back?"

"After she meets my son—pop-pop-pop—and walks him here. Usually around, around four."

We thanked her, crossed the old roadbed, and started climbing the south wall of the homeless camp. The young couple with the baby were still sitting outside their tent. The infant lay on a blanket between them,

sleeping.

“Hawk up there?” Sampson asked, gesturing toward the uppermost tier.

The young woman, who wore only a bra and shorts, shrugged. “Dunno. I don’t keep track of him.”

I showed them the picture of Corey McGovern. “Do you know this girl?”

She looked, then nodded. “I’ve seen her around. But I don’t think she lives here. Phil?”

The young man, who’d been ignoring us as we spoke to his partner, took his eyes off the dream of another life in the distance. He glanced at the picture. “Nope, she don’t live here. Comes through once in a while, though.”

“Why?” Sampson asked. “She come to see someone?”

He gazed at his feet a moment. “Me and Tammy don’t want to be involved in nothing, man. We just don’t.”

I crouched down and addressed the mom. “We can help get you into a shelter, Tammy. Your baby here makes you a number-one priority for a bed.”

“I won’t leave Phil,” she said flatly.

“We’ll make sure Phil can go too,” Sampson said. “But you have to tell us who this girl was coming to see here. This is a murder investigation.”

“Corey’s dead?” Tammy asked.

“Yeah, unfortunately. She was killed last night.”

Tammy looked at Phil. “Tell them.”

Phil seemed to wrestle with that a moment, then said, “I’ve seen her up there talking to Choir Boy and going into Hawk’s place a couple of times. She was there just yesterday.”

“You saw this girl go in Hawk’s shelter yesterday?” We’d seen her in the area, but this was confirmation that she’d specifically been with Hawk.

“Not for long, but she was in there with him,” Phil said. “Go up on top of the bridge. Ask him. He’s usually up there about now, doing his thing.”

They showed us the best way to get onto the ghost ramp from this side of the camp; it involved climbing a ladder of sorts made of stout lengths of rebar sticking out of the concrete. We were drenched in sweat by the time we climbed over the guardrail, but we immediately spotted the head high troll of the south.

Alejandro Rodriguez was about forty yards from us down the ramp. He was bare-chested and barefoot. His sandals and grubby T-shirt were tossed on the ground near a camouflage military pack a few feet away.

Hawk's head was thrown back, his eyes were closed, and his palms were raised toward the blazing sun. He spun in slow circles, laughing and weeping at the same time.

"Show me the way!" he cried. "Show, show, show me the way!"

OceanofPDF.com

35

JOHN SAMPSON'S RIGHT HAND went to his service weapon at the small of his back. Mine did the same as we walked toward Hawk.

He seemed not to notice, lost between despair and delight, crying a little, giggling a lot.

Nearby, I saw what was the probable cause of his odd behavior: an open plastic bag of dried mushrooms sitting on the flap of his pack.

Sampson coughed, hand still on his weapon. "Mr. Rodriguez?"

The former Special Forces operator kept on whirling slowly as if oblivious to us. But his laughing and crying ebbed. He finally stopped spinning, lowered his arms, opened his bloodshot eyes, and tried to focus on us.

"Bummer," he said.

"Not what you expected in your microdose visions?" Sampson said.

Hawk threw back his head and roared with laughter. He held his sides and chortled. He leaned over, whimpering and gurgling like a happy, happy baby.

This went on for almost thirty seconds before he stopped and stood up again. He was still a little wobbly, but his gaze on us was more even.

Holding up his hands, he grinned sheepishly. "I admit I might have slightly exceeded the recommended dose today."

"Why don't we hold on to these for you while you wind down," Sampson said, crouching and taking the bag.

"Man," he moaned. "Don't do that. Those fungi are decriminalized and are the only things keeping me going while I sort out all the crazy shit that's happened to me."

"By tripping and spinning in circles?" I asked.

"Beats boozing and holing up in a dark room," he snapped. "That'll kill you. Shrooms are healers, man. Read up on it."

"You should be taking those under a professional's care," I said.

“There are a lot of psychological pros around the bridge here,” he said, and chortled again.

Sampson said, “We have some follow-up questions.”

Hawk’s eyebrows rose. “And I’m here to answer them, Detectives, especially if you look the other way on the shrooms. C’mon. I’m up here. I don’t hurt anyone. I talk to the mushroom gods. They do me good.”

I avoided giving him an answer about the hallucinogens and walked toward him, holding up my phone. “Do you know this girl? We heard she comes here to see you.”

Rodriguez frowned and took a few steps to meet me. He focused on the picture, and his eyes widened.

“Corey,” he said.

“Corey McGovern?”

He nodded.

“And does she come here to see you?”

“Sometimes. Why? What of it?”

Sampson said, “She’s, like, fifteen.”

Hawk snorted. “More like twenty-two. I’ve seen her ID.”

“It’s a fake.”

He shrugged. “I’m no expert. She *says* she’s twenty-two.”

“Why does she come to see you?”

“Her uncle Marco was in the ’Stan too. Messed him all up, and he offed himself. Sometimes she just needs to talk about him.”

Rodriguez got a confused look then, as if in his overly high state, he’d just realized that he’d been missing something in the conversation. “Hey, what’s this all about, anyway?”

“Corey is dead,” I said. “She was shot and set on fire last night near a homeless camp about three miles from here.”

Rodriguez got a gut-punched expression on his face that rippled to tortured as he slowly collapsed onto the pocked hot surface of the ghost ramp, racked with deep sobs from a hallucinating heart.

OceanofPDF.com

36

JOHN SAMPSON DROPPED ME back at the hospital around three thirty. He was headed to the Avid Eyeball to review their security-camera footage.

On the way to my grandmother's room, I chewed over the things we'd gotten out of Alejandro Rodriguez after his initial reaction to Corey McGovern's death.

Between crying fits as he came down off the psilocybin, Hawk told us what he knew about McGovern. He claimed she was originally from West Virginia and had run away from an abusive family and a more abusive boyfriend. They'd met six months earlier while standing in line outside the Salvation Army facility in Hyattsville, Maryland.

"She was looking for a warm coat," he remembered. "She was funny. And bright. Real personality, even though you could tell she'd been through rough times."

Hawk recognized her when he saw her under the Bridge to Nowhere, and they'd chatted some more. When he mentioned his service in Afghanistan, she'd told him about Marco, her uncle, a Marine who'd spent too much time in a forward operating base south of Kandahar.

"The constant combat twisted him," Rodriguez said. "Does that to most people."

"Just to make sure we're all on the same page, where were you last night around one a.m.?" Sampson asked.

"In a coma in my shelter," he said.

"Anybody who can corroborate that?"

"The occasional rat. Honestly, I wasn't feeling well and crashed around eleven."

We showed him the pictures on McGovern's Instagram account, and he said he wasn't surprised that she'd taken selfies in those locations. She'd longed to lead a life of luxury.

“Never knew she had this dress, though, or the heels.”

John said, “She was shot and lit on fire near the Avid Eyeball strip joint. You know it?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I got over visiting that kind of place when I was on leave in Thailand back in the day. I thought you said she died near a homeless camp.”

“She did,” I said. “Any idea why she’d be there at one in the morning?”

“Going home? I don’t know. Maybe she lived there. She was kind of secretive about her life other than that she was on the streets. Even with me.”

“We also found a lot of cash in her purse. A thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills.”

Hawk frowned. “If she had that kind of money, she could’ve rented a room. She didn’t need to sleep in a camp. How’d she come by it? Hooking?”

“We don’t know,” Sampson said.

“Were you sleeping with her?” I said. “With Corey?”

He looked annoyed. “Nah, man, it wasn’t like that. Corey was a little sister who needed to talk from time to time. I never laid a hand on her in any kind of way. Swear.”

“Know anyone who did?”

“No.”

“Anyone who’d want to?”

He raised both palms. “Lots of guys, I suppose.”

“But no one here under the bridge? No one in particular?”

Hawk shrugged, then blinked. “Yeah, now that you mention it. That Choir Boy had a thing for her. Said he dug her pigtails. Said she reminded him of a girl he used to sing with when he was younger.”

Choir Boy yet again, I thought as the hospital elevator opened on Nana Mama’s floor. *How are we going to find you?*

I decided it was worth a shot to put in a request for all patrol officers in Southeast and Northeast DC to be on the lookout for a tall, pudgy young white guy wearing a *Choir Boy* T-shirt. I stopped outside the elevator and texted the request to my boss, followed by the photo of the ex-seminarian

from the latest victim's Instagram account.

Then I hurried to Nana Mama's room, feeling strange. I suddenly had some premonition that I did not understand. Slowing before I entered her room, I wondered if this was the moment I'd dreaded from the time I was nine years old. *What if she never wakes up?*

I mustered my courage and went in. Bree was by my grandmother's side.

"Anything?"

"They did the procedure to replace the piece of skull bone and stopped the sedatives about an hour ago. She moans and twitches now and then, but she hasn't opened her eyes. I keep talking to her."

"Let me try."

"I've got this," she said. "The aunts are here from Starksville. They're with Damon in the cafeteria. You should go say hello. I'll text immediately if Nana starts to come around."

"My phone's dying," I said. "Text Damon I'm coming."

OceanofPDF.com

37

I HEARD MY AUNTS before I saw them. Specifically, I heard Connie Lou Parks's one-of-a-kind laugh. Aunt Connie, my uncle Brock's widow, had a world-class infectious laugh that exploded from deep in her belly, shaking her whole body, rising from her throat like a French horn, and radiating warmth in all directions.

I came around a divider and saw my aunt sitting there at a cafeteria table.

Connie Lou caught sight of me, cut off her laugh, and launched herself from her chair.

"Look at you!" I said and hugged her.

"Hush, now," she said; she grinned and kissed my cheek.

A tall, big-boned woman, Connie used to be quite heavy, but the last time I'd seen her in North Carolina, she'd lost more than forty pounds on a caveman diet and said she had plans to lose forty more. It was clear that she'd met her goal and then some. Even after the initial weight loss, she'd been built like a linebacker, but now she looked more like a hoops forward.

"It's true. You're transformed!"

"Ozempic," said Aunt Hattie, my mother's younger sister, who'd had her back to me when I spotted Connie.

Hattie Parks Tate got to her feet. She was younger than Connie, shorter than Connie, and naturally slender. As always, she instantly reminded me of my mother. Same almond eyes, same elegant bone structure.

She pushed Aunt Connie aside playfully and said, "Give your aunt Hattie some sugar, Alex." Her voice was almost identical to how I remembered my mom's.

I grinned and hugged her, smelling her familiar lavender perfume, which made rare positive memories from my early childhood flash through my mind. "I'm sorry we're here under these circumstances," she said.

"I'm thrilled you're here," I said. "Thank you both for coming."

“Where else would we be?” Aunt Connie said. “With her sister, Tia, in that memory-care facility, we had to be here to support Regina. She was always a role model to me. The one who left in search of her dreams.”

“She’s still a role model,” Hattie said, taking her seat again. “You haven’t given up on her, have you, Alex?”

“Not in any way.”

“Good.”

“How’s everyone in Starksville?”

They told me how my cousins were doing and said my niece Naomi—my late brother Aaron’s daughter, now a criminal lawyer—had just won another big homicide trial.

“Other than that, Starksville does not change,” Aunt Connie said.

“But you do,” I said. “I just can’t get over how great you look.”

Aunt Connie beamed.

“Ozempic,” Aunt Hattie said again.

Connie’s face fell. “Why do you keep saying that, Hats?”

“Because it’s true.”

“And that’s a crime?”

Her sister-in-law shifted in her seat. “No.”

“Better not be, because all my lab numbers are perfect now. No diabetes. No heart issues. My knees and hips have never felt better.”

“And that’s great,” Aunt Hattie said, though she sounded unconvinced.

“It is a miracle,” Connie said firmly. She looked at me. “Which is what I’m hoping will happen for your grandmother.”

“Me too,” I said. “By the way, have either of you heard from—”

From down the hall, Damon ran toward us, waving his phone. “Bree says she’s stirring, Dad! Nana Mama might be waking up!”

OceanofPDF.com

38

JOHN SAMPSON PULLED INTO the lot outside the Avid Eyeball at a quarter to four on Sunday afternoon. Three cars sat out front idling in the heat; their drivers—two guys in their fifties tapping their steering wheels, and one twentysomething smoking a joint—sat waiting impatiently for the strip club to open.

Sampson did not wait. He got out, scanned the exterior of the building, and saw at least three cameras.

He went to the front door, knocked hard on the window with the Closed sign, and got a glare from a brassy blonde with big lips sitting behind the admission counter filing her nails. Behind her hung a large painting of a woman's eye with long lashes.

When Sampson pressed his badge and credentials to the window, she acted like the weight of the world had just landed on her shoulders. She sighed, tossed aside her emery board, and came to the door. She was wearing a sleeveless white jumpsuit that revealed plenty of cleavage.

The blonde opened the door and stepped back. John heard car doors opening behind him. She waited until he'd entered the lobby, then leaned out and shouted, "Fifteen minutes, you effing horndogs!"

She slammed the door, locked it, and turned to Sampson with her arms crossed. "Our liquor license isn't expired, the dancers are all older than eighteen, we don't let the girls date the patrons, and we do not allow or serve minors. Period."

"All good to know. Your name?"

"I'm Tina here."

"Real name, Tina?"

She pursed her puffy lips. "Millicent White. Milly."

"You the manager, Milly?"

"Until nine."

"You talk to the night manager about what went down near here last

night, Milly?”

“Keira?” she said, frowning. “No. What did the unhoused community do now?”

“Someone shot a young woman in the head and set her on fire behind the tool-rental place.”

“What?” Milly said, horrified. “I saw the yellow police tape over there, but I—”

“The victim was last picked up by a camera at the front of the tool store. She was seen arriving in an Uber around one a.m. and entering your parking lot, heading toward your front door. I need to see your security tapes.”

“Sure,” the manager said nervously. “We’ve got nothing to hide. Blinky, our chief of security, will help you, but he just stepped out to get us both an early dinner.”

“How long before he gets back?”

“Ten minutes?”

Sampson pulled out his phone and called up some of the pictures Alex had sent him from Corey McGovern’s Instagram account.

“Ever seen her?” he asked, starting with the most recent post, the one with the caption about making way for a positive day.

“Nope, I don’t know her,” Milly said, “and she’s too young to get in here.”

“She had an ID that said she was twenty-two,” Sampson replied. “It’s an outstanding fake.” He called up another picture, this one of the victim in a black cocktail dress, high heels, and makeup.

The strip-club manager studied it admiringly. “I still don’t recognize her. But she looks ten years older there.”

“She does,” Sampson said, thumbing to the next picture, the one where McGovern was flanked by Hawk and Choir Boy. “Here she is again. How about these two? Know either of these guys?”

Milly started to shake her head but then took the phone from Sampson and studied it closely. She used her fingers to zoom in on the image.

“Never seen the hunk on her left,” she said. “But I remember the chubby dude on her right because of that T-shirt. He came in a couple of weeks ago wearing it, and he stank *bad*. None of the girls would go near him. And he had a weird first name. I remember that.”

“Weird like what?” Sampson asked.

She squinted, thinking. “Aldo? No.” She thought some more, then smiled. “Aldous. I remember because he said it rhymed with Albus—you know, like Albus Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series?”

OceanofPDF.com

39

NANA MAMA'S EYELIDS KEPT twitching, but her eyes had not yet opened. Bree stepped aside, and I moved in to hold her hand.

"Nana," I said gently. "It's time to wake up."

For a few seconds, nothing. Then she parted her lips and said weakly, "Uh?"

"It's Alex," I said. "Time to wake up now. Dr. Ames says you're ready."

For a time, maybe ten seconds, my grandmother did not react. But then, as if through sheer fortitude, her eyes came about a quarter of the way open.

"That's it," I said, squeezing her hand. "A little more now. Try to find me."

Nana Mama closed her eyes, sighed, then cracked open her eyes again, a little wider this time. I could see her eyes moving slowly, as if things were blurry, unfocused.

Then my grandmother turned her head slightly toward me; her eyes found my face for a second, drifted away, then came back. "Alex?"

"I'm right here, Nana," I said, fighting tears as my aunts, Damon, and Bree began to cheer quietly. "Do you know where you are?"

She shook her head ever so slightly, then winced and closed her eyes again.

"You're in St. Anthony's," I said. "You had a minor stroke and you hit your head when you fell off the back stoop. Do you remember?"

Nana opened her eyes, focused on me again, and again shook her head slightly.

"Ali found you," I said. "You had an operation on your head. Two, actually."

She digested that news for a long moment, puzzlement growing on her face.

"Nana?"

"When?" she asked.

“Two and a half days ago.”

She licked her lips. “Dying?”

“Not today, old lady.”

My grandmother’s eyes drifted shut and opened again. She looked at me. “Go home?”

“You want to go home, Nana?”

She made a humming noise. “Home.”

“That will be up to the neurosurgeon and Dr. Ames,” I said. “You’ve been through a lot. It’s a miracle you’re alive.”

“Way to go, Nana Mama!” Damon said just as Jannie and Ali walked in.

“She’s awake!” Jannie exclaimed.

“I knew it,” my younger son said, grinning. “Nana’s not going anywhere.”

My grandmother got a bemused expression on her face before closing her eyes again and swallowing hard. “Water.”

Dr. Sydney Ames came in. “Whoa, this is quite a crowd.”

“She’s awake and wants water, Sydney,” I said.

“Ice chips,” Dr. Ames said, shaking a plastic cup of them as she squeezed past Damon and Jannie to get to my grandmother’s bedside. She took a small plastic spoon from her pocket, scooped a couple of ice chips into it, and brought it to Nana Mama’s lips. Nana Mama sucked them in, smiled.

“Does that feel good in your throat, Regina?” the surgeon asked.

“Mmm,” my grandmother said.

“More?” Sydney said. “Of course. Much as you want.” The doctor carefully fed her more, then looked at us. “She’s not choking. This is a good sign. Did she recognize you?”

“Seems to,” I said.

“Did she understand you?”

“I think so. She was trying to answer my questions.”

“Did she?”

Nana Mama said, “Yeah.”

Dr. Ames grinned at her and gave her more ice chips. “Well, that’s good. We’ll have a speech pathologist come in tomorrow to make sure. And I’ll do a more thorough evaluation in the morning.”

“Home,” my grandmother said. “Go home.”

“You want to go home?”

“Mmm.”

“Well, we’re not there yet, Ms. Regina. We need to run some more tests and see if there’s any damage to your brain. And then you could be in for a couple of weeks at a rehab facility before you can go home.”

“Home,” Nana said and began to cry.

Our doctor and friend looked at me. “It’s impossible unless you’re ready to pay for round-the-clock care and therapists to come to her. And even then, only if I think it’s safe.”

“Otto,” my grandmother said. She took an exasperated breath and tried again. “Lot.” She looked irritated.

“Lotto,” Jannie translated. “The Powerball lotto money.”

“Well, that’s true,” I said to Dr. Ames. “Nana Mama hit the lottery a few years ago. She started a foundation to promote literacy and aid the poor with some of the winnings, but there’s plenty left over. She has the money.”

“No better way to spend it,” Bree said. “We’ll clear out space in the living room. Bring in a bed, monitors, therapists, whatever you say we need, Dr. Ames.”

“Is that what you want us to do, Nana?” I asked.

“Mmm,” she said, nodding and closing her eyes. “Home.”

OceanofPDF.com

40

JOHN SAMPSON WAS BACK at the Bridge to Nowhere again. He'd lost track of how many visits he'd made over the past few days. Now, in the late-afternoon heat and humidity, he climbed the south embankment beneath the ghost ramp, looking for the young couple he'd promised to help get into a family shelter.

The campsite where he and Alex had seen them earlier was now occupied by a surly woman in her sixties. She said the couple with the baby had up and left several hours before. She'd moved in immediately.

That saddened but did not surprise Sampson. He could not count the number of times he'd offered to help people down on their luck by hooking them up with social services only to be turned down or ghosted. Some people didn't want help. Some didn't think they deserved it. Some did not want the government paying attention to their lives for one reason or another. The rest baffled him.

From above, Sampson heard a raspy voice ask, "That you, Sampson?"

He pivoted to peer up into the shadows directly below the ramp and saw Sean Brundage sitting on an overturned five-gallon bucket, smoking a cigarette.

He climbed up to the former Metro PD detective and was surprised to see that Brundage was sitting in Hawk's spot.

"How are you, Sean?" Sampson said as he eyed the remnants of Hawk's former shelter, now in ruins.

"Better than the last time we talked," Brundage replied, scratching at his beard with one hand and stubbing out the cigarette with the other. "Seeing you and Cross made me want to try my meds again."

"Good to hear. Can I help you get off the street?"

"Nah," the former detective said. He gestured at the tattered tarp and bent poles, all that was left of Hawk's place. "I just took the former head high troll's spot. Don't want to be giving that up so soon."

“Where’d Hawk go? He was here this morning.”

“Hawk flew the coop about an hour ago,” Brundage said. “Stuffed everything he could fit into his big pack and left the rest.”

“He say why or where he was going?”

“I did not talk to the man. But I realized he was vacating when he marched by my former squat heading downhill. Soon as I saw him disappear toward the lumberyard, I came up here and staked my claim.”

“You going to fight for it?”

Brundage stared hard at Sampson. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re the new head high troll, and congratulations on that,” Sampson said. “Has Choir Boy been around?”

Brundage shook his head.

“Someone told me his first name was Aldous.”

“If you say so.” He shrugged. “Heard Hawk call him Al once.”

Rodriguez told us that he had no idea what Choir Boy’s real name was, Sampson thought.

“What about this young woman?” Sampson showed Brundage the picture of Corey McGovern sitting on the stoop of a townhome in Georgetown.

The former detective looked intently at the picture, then nodded. “She’s here a lot,” he said. “I’ve seen her with Hawk and with Choir Boy.”

“How old you think she is?”

“Looks young, but she’s in her twenties, I think.”

“That Ohio ID is fake. We checked.”

“News to me,” Brundage said. “Why the interest?”

“She’s dead. Shot and burned like the guy here the other day.”

That shocked the former detective. “Jesus. When was that?”

“Last night. Maybe two in the morning, near a strip club called the Avid Eyeball.”

“I remember that place. She hooking?”

“Our guess.”

“Mine too.”

“Why is that?”

“A couple of weeks ago, I saw her at the Fall Flower Motel, this place about two miles from here, just across the Maryland line,” Brundage said. “It’s the closest spot that’ll take us.”

“That’s the same place that Hawk said he was staying when the Audi burned.”

“Possible. Folks living here under the bridge go there to shower and sleep for the night when they come into enough spare cash. I’d imagine almost everyone on this side of the camp has been there at one time or another.”

“So you’re saying Corey McGovern used the Fall Flower more often than most?”

The former detective shook his head. “I can’t say that, ’cause I’ve only been there twice myself. But the last time I was there, she was too, and I noticed a steady parade of guys old enough to be her father knocking at her door.”

OceanofPDF.com

41

EDITH SMOOT, WHO WORKED the front desk at the Fall Flower Motel, was rail-thin and tall with brown-gray hair and skin the color and texture of parchment paper. She curled her upper lip and flared her nostrils when John Sampson showed her his badge and identification.

“Whatever anyone’s done, me and the Fall Flower had nothing to do with it,” Smoot said, flicking her fingers with their bitten nails at him dismissively.

“You’re the owner?” Sampson asked.

“I should be so blessed,” Smoot said, heavy on the sarcasm. “Night manager. And we run a clean operation here. No shenanigans, as my old man used to say.”

“Uh-huh. Know her?” he said, showing the night manager the picture of Corey McGovern in jeans and sneakers on the Georgetown stoop.

Smoot sniffed and laughed. “Hardly the clientele we get here.”

“What about her?” Sampson said, showing her a still from the Avid Eyeball’s video footage of McGovern walking through the parking lot.

The night manager’s brows knit. “Maybe.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Like I said, maybe,” Smoot said, suddenly uncomfortable. “What’s she done?”

“Got murdered, unfortunately.”

The flared nostrils and curled lip returned. “It’s a nasty life, isn’t it?”

“When was she last here?”

Smoot hesitated.

“The girl was underage,” Sampson growled. “You looking to abet pedophiles after the fact?”

That shook the night manager up. She raised her bony hands in surrender. “I had no idea. She had an Ohio ID. Even had a watermark.”

“An excellent fake. When was she last here?”

“Few days ago. That night when there was all that thunder and lightning.”

Same time Hawk said he was here, Sampson thought. He asked to see security footage from the evening in question.

Smoot gestured at a camera high in the corner of the motel office and said it had died two weeks before and the owner had been balking at paying for a replacement.

The rest of the cameras, however, including one that showed the entire parking lot and the front of the motel, were working. She made a minor stink about showing him the footage without a warrant but finally pulled it up on a laptop.

The security video had a date and running time stamp. Corey McGovern had checked into room 105 on the lower level of the Fall Flower Motel at six fifteen the evening before the Audi went up in flames. She was wearing jeans and a blue rain jacket and pulling a roller overnight bag. Her hair wasn’t in pigtails; it was pulled back from her face, which was heavily made up. She could have passed as much older than she was, especially with a convincing ID.

At seven minutes after seven, Alejandro Rodriguez also arrived at the motel. The former Special Forces operator went to room 212 on the second floor at the far east end of the building and vanished inside.

At seven forty p.m., a dark-haired male wearing black pants, a black shirt, black dress shoes, and a dark ball cap pulled down low parked diagonally across the street, walked the length of the lot, and knocked on the door of room 105. Corey McGovern answered, wearing the black dress she would die in two days later.

Sampson took screenshots of McGovern greeting the man and then fast-forwarded the footage until he left about forty minutes later. The mystery man again had his cap pulled low over his eyes. Sampson watched as he crossed the parking lot and drove off.

Sampson studied the rear of the car in the image. He couldn’t see the license plate clearly because the light seemed to be off. But he peered closely at the video, trying to make out the symbol on the trunk lid. *Is that a logo of interlocking circles?*

He took a screenshot. He’d have the techs blow up the image, see what they could learn.

Once more Sampson fast-forwarded the footage. At nine p.m. sharp, just as the rain began to fall and the storm winds started to rustle the trees outside the manager's office, another man ambled in off the street and crossed the parking lot to room 105.

He was a head taller than the first guy, pear-shaped, and wearing gray sweatpants, high-top sneakers, and a red windbreaker with the hood up. Sampson could not make out his face until he knocked on Corey McGovern's door, stepped back, and tugged off his hood as she opened it.

Now he saw the guy clearly in profile. The girl's second visitor of the night looked to be much younger than her first, with a baby face and curly sandy-colored hair.

Sampson's detective instincts went on high alert. He could not see what the client was wearing beneath his windbreaker as he bent to greet Corey and then walked inside.

But Sampson knew in his gut exactly who he was looking at, and he pumped his fist.

"Got you," he said.

OceanofPDF.com

42

DR. SYDNEY AMES HAD argued against Nana Mama leaving the hospital, but once she saw that we were set on taking her home that very evening and that we were not worried about the high cost of her private care, she stepped in and took control.

In a world that too often slowed down when speed was required, it helped to have someone well connected who could grease the wheels and make things happen. Within two hours, delivery trucks were outside our three-story white-shingled house on Fifth Street in Southeast DC.

To give the equipment more space, Damon, Ali, Bree, and I moved furniture around in the living room, so that the deliverymen could carry in a hospital bed and situate it with a view of the kitchen and the TV screen. Dr. Ames herself set up multiple pieces of medical equipment, and after the surgeon finished, two private home-health nurses she knew personally—Bobby Jain and Juanita Jones—arrived and began preparing for my grandmother.

Shortly before eight that evening, Nana Mama arrived from St. Anthony's in an ambulance but without lights or sirens. She was very weak but in good spirits as she was wheeled into the house.

Aunt Connie Lou and Aunt Hattie were making a late dinner in the kitchen and fussed over her as we waited for the workmen and the aides to finish setting everything up.

"What cooking?" Nana asked in a soft voice.

Connie said, "Spiral ham, mashed sweet potatoes, and a sliced cucumber, avocado, and pepper salad."

"With my Dijon vinaigrette," Hattie said. "And peach pie."

"Visit more," my grandmother said, her lips curling toward a smile.

Ali came in from the kitchen. Nana coughed, cleared her throat, said, "You find me? Call ambulance?"

My son raised his eyebrows. "You didn't go in an ambulance, Nana.

There weren’t any available. You went in the back of Uncle John’s pickup!”

Nana Mama looked at me, a question on her face.

I nodded. “We didn’t have time to take you in style.”

“Humph,” she said, looking confused. Just then, the nurses came over, introduced themselves to my grandmother, and explained that they would care for her until a day team took over the following morning. Then they helped the ambulance workers move her from their gurney into the hospital bed.

When Nana Mama was settled and Dr. Ames had departed with promises to return on her way to work in the morning, the rest of us gathered around my grandmother and ate our dinner from plates in our laps.

“Smells good.” She sighed. “Hungry.” She closed her eyes and swallowed, grimacing a little. “Throat too sore.”

“Nonsense,” Aunt Connie said, getting up. “We’ll just blend dinner up for you.”

Nana swallowed hard again, then opened her eyes. “Where Jannie?”

“She’s got a meet in the morning,” I told her.

“Run fast.”

“She always does,” I agreed. “This is big-time. She’s on a path to qualify for NCAA nationals.”

“Fast girl,” Nana said, and her eyes started to drift shut. “I say truth now.”

Bree said playfully, “You saying you’ve been hiding things from us?”

My grandmother’s eyes fluttered open again. She hesitated, coughed, swallowed, and then said, “First husband.”

OceanofPDF.com

43

AUNT HATTIE JUMPED TO her feet, sending her plate to the floor, and called to Aunt Connie Lou, who was loading food into a blender in the kitchen.

“I knew it, Connie!” Hattie cried. “Regina says she was married before Reggie!”

Connie came to the doorway and gave her a high five. “Called it!” Hattie said.

My grandmother stared at her. “You talk me?”

“Yes, we talk about you. You’re a legend to women in Starksville.” Hattie sniffed. “What else do we got to talk about down there other than the past?”

I stared at Nana Mama. “You were married before my grandfather?”

Nana Mama’s marriage to my paternal grandfather, Reggie Cross, hadn’t been a good one. He was a handsome merchant mariner who was away half the year; Nana Mama said he’d been a charmer who’d swept her off her feet with his stories. But not long after their wedding and the birth of their only child, Jason, she realized that Reggie was away too much and drunk too often when he was home. And he became more violent and was unfaithful to her.

“Got to the point where all we did was fight. He didn’t mind drinking while we fought, and he didn’t mind using his fists either. I decided one day that, despite my marriage vows, this wasn’t the life I wanted, or deserved,” she’d once told me.

So when my dad was around seven, she’d finally divorced Reggie and moved herself and Jason up to DC to start a new life. Even as a struggling single mother, Nana had managed to get a degree at Howard University and then found work as a teacher and, later, a school vice principal.

Reggie had let his wife and son go without a fight. But around age fifteen, Jason decided to return to live with his dad in Starksville—which

was where my dad eventually met and married Hattie's big sister, my late mother, Christina.

At least, that was the story I'd been told. Turned out there was a prequel.

"Yes," Nana said. She licked her lips. "Met Walker. I seventeen. He twenty-three."

"Oooh," Aunt Hattie said from the floor as she scooped her spilled dinner back onto her plate. "Tell us more, Regina!"

"He in a band," my grandmother said. "Walker Arnold."

Aunt Connie Lou came into the room carrying a bowl with pureed dinner in it. She set it in front of Nana. "A looker, huh, this Walker?"

"Handsome," Nana Mama said, opening her mouth and accepting a spoonful from Connie Lou. She savored it slowly, smiled weakly. "Mmm. Good mush."

Everyone laughed. "There's more mush where that came from," Connie said.

Ali said, "What instrument did Walker play?"

"Sax. Dance. Jazz."

Hattie snapped her fingers and chuckled. "You always did love jazz and the saxophone."

Nana shrugged weakly. "Walker sweet-talk me up. After me eighteen, we…" Her voice trailed off.

"You eloped?" Aunt Hattie said.

"Mmm."

I shook my head, astonished. "You got divorced before you married Reggie?"

"A… annul…"

"Annulment," Aunt Connie said, nodding to Aunt Hattie. "That explains why there were no records available in the online search."

"You look?" Nana asked, incredulous.

"Just a little," Connie said. "On the internet."

Over the course of the next half hour, my grandmother ate and haltingly explained. Walker Arnold's dance band had had a standing gig for the summer in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and as soon as she turned eighteen, they'd gotten married by a justice of the peace down there.

"Young love," Nana Mama said. "Crazy. Music. Dancing. Party. But three weeks, over."

“What happened?” Damon asked.

Nana accepted another spoonful of the blended dinner, swallowed it with a slight grimace. “Walker angry drunk. Hit me. Saw future. Regina walk on Walker.”

The monitor tracking my grandmother’s cardiac rhythm began to beep softly.

She said, “Tired.”

Bobby the nurse stepped up, looked at the monitor, and said, “You only came around a few hours ago, Mrs. Cross. I’m surprised you’re still awake.”

“Not,” she said, and closed her eyes. “Night. Night.”

The monitor’s alarm stopped. Her heart rate returned to normal.

I smiled to myself as I stood to collect dishes and take them to the kitchen. Despite this lingering thing with her heart, despite the head injury and minor stroke, and despite the obvious language deficits, my grandmother still had her sense of humor. She was still my Nana Mama.

But for how long?

OceanofPDF.com

44

BY NINE FIFTEEN THAT night, Nana Mama was fully asleep, the aunts had left for the hotel where they were staying, Damon had gone out to meet a few old friends, Bree was in the top-floor office, and Ali was up in his room studying for a test. As the night nurses ran through their tasks, I did the dishes and put the plates away as quietly as I could.

The doorbell rang. It was John Sampson, coming by to check on Nana Mama.

"She's sound asleep and happy to be home," I said, letting him in. "Kind of a miracle she's even still breathing."

"You could have said that long before she hit her noggin," Sampson noted. "That woman is a walking miracle." The two of us sat at the kitchen table. "I wanted to come talk to you about some information I got this afternoon."

"Tell me."

Sampson described his return to the Bridge to Nowhere, his talk with Sean Brundage, and Hawk's rapid exit from the homeless camp, destination unknown. I was depressed to hear him confirm that Corey McGovern had apparently been using her room at the Fall Flower Motel to turn tricks. I'd hoped we were wrong about her, but the evidence was there in the screenshots John had taken on the motel's laptop in all their squalor and neon.

As clear as the image of Corey McGovern entering room 105 was one of Alejandro Rodriguez carrying a backpack up the stairs to his own room. Darkness fell soon after, and in the pictures that followed, a few garish floodlights from the roof of the motel threw shadows on the parking lot.

"No better picture of the first client?" I asked.

Sampson shook his head. "He was careful, like he knew where the cameras were. But check the back of the car he gets into in the next shot. It's kind of tough to see because the license plate light is out, but look at the

center of the trunk lid."

I did, staring at the fuzzy image. I could just barely make out what looked like four interlocking circles. "Audi?"

"I think so."

"Is he our bridge victim?"

"Could be. He's wearing black from head to toe. Only thing missing is the clerical collar Boog says he saw."

As I stared at the screenshot of the rear of the car, my mind veered off in multiple directions, trying to make sense of all the new information Sampson had learned.

Every direction it took looped back to Corey McGovern.

"Do you think her death is directly related to the guy in the Audi?" I asked.

"Both were shot and lit on fire," Sampson said. "So it's a fair bet. Go to the next screenshot. Second client."

The time stamp on the next shot showed the second visitor arriving. He was tall and kind of goofy-looking, with a wild mop of curly sand-colored hair.

"That is Choir Boy, sure as I am sitting here," Sampson said. "Pic of him leaving about forty minutes later is even better."

I flipped to that screenshot and saw Choir Boy's pudgy face clearly, no sunglasses, no cap. "Now we just need a last name for Aldous here."

I swiped to the next screenshot, another one showing Choir Boy exiting McGovern's room at twenty of ten.

"There's more. Next few stills throw the whole thing up in the air," Sampson told me.

In the next screenshot, which was time-stamped at eleven ten, I saw Hawk standing at the open door of Corey McGovern's room. He was grinning and holding up a bottle of wine.

"Rodriguez never mentioned seeing McGovern at the motel on the night of the thunderstorms," I said.

"No, he did not. But he's in there for an hour. Plus there's this." Sampson reached over and swiped to the next screenshot. Taken at ten past midnight, it showed Hawk kissing Corey at the door. She had a towel wrapped around herself, and he was gripping her bottom through it.

"And yet Rodriguez swore that the relationship between them was just a

brother-sister kind of thing," I said. More photos showed Hawk leaving the Fall Flower Motel parking lot in the rain at fifteen minutes after midnight and not returning until broad daylight eight hours later.

"Where was he for eight hours?" I wondered aloud.

"Exactly," Sampson said. "Certainly gives him opportunity. And if client number one with the Audi is also the vic, it gives Hawk plenty of time to track him down, shoot him, and set his car on fire below the ghost ramp."

OceanofPDF.com

45

BEFORE I COULD REPLY, Bree came into the kitchen where Sampson and I were talking. She was carrying her laptop.

"I think I found something that might help you guys," she said. "A coincidence, but sometimes you have to take a gift when it's given."

Sampson frowned. "Explain."

"One of the things we do at work, our bread and butter, really, is vet companies and people for other companies and people."

"Makes sense," I said.

"Anyway, one of our clients, who shall remain anonymous, has been looking to invest in several real estate projects with a company based in Bethesda called Frost and Lear Development. They're private. Not much about them online."

Sampson looked at his watch. "How's this going to help us?"

"I know it's past your bedtime, but give a lady a chance," Bree said.

He smiled and held up his hands in surrender. "Keep going."

"I'll cut right to the chase. When I looked into the land beneath the Bridge to Nowhere, I kept coming up with part ownership belonging to the District and the rest to the feds."

I nodded. "You'd said that."

"I did," Bree said. "But just now I thought about looking into the land ownership adjacent to the ramp and that homeless camp."

"Frost and Lear?" Sampson said.

Bree bobbed her head. "For the past year they've been quietly buying up all kinds of properties from the lumberyard to the ramp and from the ramp to the river. A month ago, they closed on more condemned properties to the left and right of the camp." She turned her laptop and showed us a map. "Frost and Lear has the place surrounded."

Studying the map, I said, "Which means they probably intend to get control of the ramp next."

“Exactly,” Bree said. “Why buy up condemned properties with a doughnut hole in the middle you can’t develop?”

“Frost and Lear has to want that camp gone,” Sampson said.

“But why murder people and desecrate bodies to do it?” I said.

Bree shrugged. “Timetables? Deadlines? Financial considerations? Plus, it has to give the people living there the heebie-jeebies, knowing someone is targeting them. Maybe the intent is to scare the community enough that they leave on their own.”

“Certainly gives them an incentive to get out of Dodge.”

“And there’s more,” Bree said, pecking at the keyboard. “You know that building where the first homeless victim was shot and burned?”

“Frost and Lear owns that too?” Sampson said.

She nodded. “They bought it through a shell company three months ago.”

OceanofPDF.com

46

BEFORE JOHN SAMPSON LEFT, he and I made a plan to pay a visit to Frost and Lear Development's offices in Bethesda first thing on Monday morning.

But our phones lit up at four a.m.

A fire had been spotted burning in the woods below the Broadmoor, a housing co-op in the southwestern part of Rock Creek Park. Firefighters and police officers called to the scene discovered a body in the flames on the uphill side of the Reservation 630 trail.

Sampson and I arrived in the rear parking lot of the Broadmoor as the sky pinkened with dawn. Fire captain Sheila Wilson told us they'd managed to smother the flames before the body was completely consumed.

"But it took a lot of effort and dirt," Captain Wilson said. "That wasn't regular gas used as the accelerant."

"Avgas?" Sampson asked.

"Maybe. But if so, only as the base. Looks like there was a jelly of some sort added to it, which made it almost like napalm, tough to knock down."

"Napalm?" I said, shocked by the idea.

"I said *like* napalm," Captain Wilson said. "We're lucky there was no wind and that the area around the body was rocky. If there'd been a breeze or if he'd been set on fire in the leaves, this whole side of the park could have gone up."

We followed Wilson downhill with flashlights in the dawn light as her team struggled to drag their hoses up out of the woods. Despite the lack of wind, the thermals were trending downward, so we didn't get hit with the stench of the spent fuel and the badly charred body until we were close enough to see two Metro officers taping off a wide area around the burn.

We put on blue booties and gloves and ducked under the tape. The body was on a rocky outcrop about thirty yards off the trail.

Sampson called to Wilson and the police officers, "Is there a homeless

camp around here?”

“Kind of a ritzy part of town for that,” the fire captain replied.

One of the officers said, “They might camp here for the night, but there aren’t any permanent shelters that I know of. The National Park Service frowns on that.”

I asked, “Has the Park Service been notified?”

“Not yet,” the other officer said.

The corpse was splayed belly-down on a blackened ledge, not curled in the fetal position like typical fire victims. I moved closer and crouched beside the body—which was still smoking—and shone my light on the back of the head.

“He shot first?” Sampson asked.

“Small-caliber entry wound high on the parietal bone,” I said. “So what are we thinking? Killer lures or ambushes him here in the middle of the night, shoots him, then douses him in avgas and torches him?”

Sampson scratched his head. “I can’t see someone coming here in the dark carrying a gun in one hand and, what, a heavy gas can in the other? If he used avgas, it must’ve been hidden nearby.”

“Possible,” I said. “There should be signs of that somewhere around here.”

Sampson walked around the scene slowly, studying the scorched earth. There was indeed some kind of sticky, oily substance visible on the ground and on the body when we played our flashlights on the scene. He gestured to the bottom of the ledge and an off-white blob about eighteen inches by eighteen inches. “Looks like something plastic melted there.”

“I see it,” I said, and marked it with a stick from outside the burn. “We’ll have them sample it, see if it was the fuel tank.”

Daylight was coming fast, revealing in more detail the oak and pine foliage overhead and the area around the body. Beyond the perimeter of the burn, I could make out where someone might have come through the brush from the hiking trail.

I left the crime scene and wandered slowly downhill, looking to the left and right of that suggestion of a path, using my flashlight until the sun was completely up. I reached the trail without finding any hard evidence that either the victim or the killer had come that way.

I scanned the woods on the other side of the trail. There was a brush-

choked drainage ditch running parallel to the path toward Rock Creek and the parkway, where cars rumbled in the distance.

A circle of white and red in the ditch caught my eye.

OceanofPDF.com

47

I SLID DOWN THE steep bank into the ditch and landed in muck up to my ankles. Feeling the ooze going into my shoes, I swore as I pushed aside thorny branches and stalks. I quickly spotted the red and white circle I'd come searching for, attached to a backpack the color of dead grass.

Hanging upside down in a thick bunch of brush about three feet away, the khaki bag had a circular patch on the front. I had to tilt my head to make out the logo, which depicted the image of a curled-up red fox. Around the fox in red letters, it said FJÄLLRÄVEN KÅNKEN.

I knew the Fjällräven brand. Expensive, Scandinavian, well-made urban-warrior gear and clothing. This bag looked new. Not the kind of thing that got tossed in a ditch by its owner.

"John, I've got something here!" I yelled, pulling out my iPhone to take pictures of the bag and its position.

Sampson appeared above me. He grimaced. "You in the mud?"

"Up to my ankles, unfortunately. See this here, though? That is a ridiculously expensive, brand-new-looking backpack."

The grimace vanished, replaced by interest. "I see it."

"Take a picture and get me and the bag in it before I see what's inside."

Sampson took several shots, then said, "You're good."

I tried to step forward and immediately felt the suction that meant my shoe was coming off, but I pulled my foot up anyway. The other shoe came off with my next step. I kept moving through the muck in my socks and yanked the backpack down.

I turned it around and saw a bulge in the zipped front pocket. Inside I found a billfold with a driver's license and a university ID.

"Bag appears to belong to Drake Conway," I said. "Sixty. ID says faculty at Georgetown University."

Sampson gestured over his shoulder and up the hill. "I bet it's our vic."

"My bet too," I said. Definitely didn't fit the homeless profile, however.

“Come closer and lift this up out of here before I go back for my shoes.”

“You’re in your socks now?” he said, wrinkling his nose.

“Trials and tribulations,” I said.

Sampson pulled the pack up on the trail, and I went back and dug in the muck until I found my shoes. I threw them onto the trail, then crawled up the steep bank.

When I reached the top, I lay panting on the path a moment. “Now I get why rock climbers are so fit.”

“You used to rock climb.”

“Well, I used to be fitter too,” I said, sitting up with a groan. I wiped the mud off my shoes onto the grass.

We opened the backpack. It was full of bulging manila files and several books about religion in Europe during the Reformation. Apparently, Conway was a professor of theology.

“I see a tablet,” Sampson said. “But no phone.”

“I see something else here,” I said. “Something I don’t like.”

“What’s that?”

“A connection. Boog said that the dead guy in the Audi was wearing a clerical collar. Choir Boy was apparently booted from a seminary. And Conway here, presumably the latest vic, teaches theology.”

“Great,” Sampson moaned. “I hate when religion’s involved. Media goes nuts. And they’re going to go nuts over this, Alex. They might be able to ignore an underage homeless runaway getting killed, but not someone like Conway.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Hurricane dead ahead.”

OceanofPDF.com

48

BREE STONE ADJUSTED THE collar of her blouse before picking up her briefcase and entering a glass-faced office building in downtown Bethesda.

Alex had called her from the scene to tell her about the newest victim and to check on Nana Mama.

During the night, Nana had had two more minor heart “episodes,” as the nurses called them. But she had rallied both times. When Bree left, Nana was sitting up in bed eating eggs and porridge. The day nurses had arrived, as had Aunt Connie and Aunt Hattie.

Damon was dropping Ali off at school, so Bree had been able to drive straight here. She took an elevator to the sixth floor just before nine a.m.

Frost and Lear Development occupied a suite at the far end of the hall. She knocked and got no answer.

She tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. She was on thin ice as far as cause, but she nevertheless pushed on. She opened the door and peered into a small, well-appointed reception area with three chairs.

“Hello?” Bree called. “Anyone here?”

She heard a chair being pushed back on a wood floor followed by footsteps, and a fit, tanned, and well-coiffed man in his thirties appeared. He was holding a coffee mug and wearing pressed jeans, thousand-dollar loafers, and a crisp white dress shirt, no tie.

“Can I help you?” the man said, looking her up and down. “We’re not interested in buying anything at the moment.”

Bree beamed at him, crossed the reception area, and stuck out her hand. “I’m not selling anything. Bree Stone. I’m with Bluestone Group in Alexandria. We do security work.”

“Okay?” he said, taking her hand and shaking it perfunctorily.

“You’re David Lear?”

“Jeffrey Frost. David retired.”

“Wonderful to meet you, Mr. Frost,” she said, digging out a business card and handing it to him.

“What’s this about? I have meetings to prepare for.”

Bree smiled again. “Bluestone has been engaged by several investors to help with due diligence on projects that your company is involved in.”

He took that in. “Which investors?”

“Arcadia Fund, for one,” she said, which was true.

Frost’s brows knit. “We sent Arcadia all our documents two weeks ago.”

“Which is why I’m here,” Bree said brightly. “I just have a few questions.”

“This isn’t usually how it’s done.”

“I know, but Arcadia wants to make a decision soon.”

The developer checked his watch. “You’ve got ten minutes.”

He led her back to a large office with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides, chrome and black leather furniture, and a large wooden table with several models of developments on it.

Bree gestured to the table. “You’re busy guys.”

“We don’t let grass grow under our feet,” Frost said impatiently. “Your questions?”

“Arcadia, of course, is interested in your B Street mixed-use project,” Bree began. “But they’re wondering about things you have not disclosed.”

“Such as?”

“The recent purchases of land between the lumberyard in Southeast DC and the Anacostia River,” Bree said.

Frost was quiet for a moment. “We’re not obligated to disclose those buys.”

She had anticipated this tack. “Except as they pertain to your financials. Arcadia is a little concerned you might be spreading yourself too thin.”

“Hardly,” Frost said dismissively. “Those purchases are speculative and paid for with our personal funds.”

“So do you plan to flip or build?”

“Build,” he said. “New housing, a shopping center, and a pedestrian walkway along the river, in an area we believe is woefully neglected and underutilized.”

“Visionary,” Bree said agreeably. “But I noticed that you don’t have *all* the land under your control. There’s a hole there. That old off-ramp.”

Frost stiffened. “We’re working on that.”

“How so? It’s jointly owned land held by the District and the DOT.”

“The land has not been used in a decade. Both governmental agencies recognize that the ramp cannot stand there forever.”

“You’re talking to them about getting permission to buy the land and the ramp?”

“Yes, we’re negotiating to buy the land and dismantle the ramp at our own cost.”

“That won’t be cheap.”

“Nothing worth doing is cheap, Ms. Stone. Are we done?”

“Just a couple more questions. We’ve had someone check out that property, and there’s a homeless encampment there.”

“That’s not my problem, Ms. Stone. Or Arcadia’s.” Frost shrugged. “They’ll have to move elsewhere. Unless they wish to stay for demolition, which would be very dangerous.”

“You also own an old apartment building east of New York Avenue in Northeast DC?”

“A derelict and condemned building. Yes.”

“Thank you,” she said and then let herself go steely. “Can you tell me about the homeless man who was shot and lit on fire behind that building?”

He appeared surprised and responded, “I’m sorry, but I did not know about that. I admit I’ve lived a privileged life. I can’t begin to understand the dangers associated with poverty and homelessness.”

What an ass, she thought, but said, “Do you know about the man who was shot to death and set on fire three days ago below that ghost ramp you want to buy? He was driving a very expensive Audi.”

Frost looked genuinely surprised at that. Then he pursed his lips and said, “You’re full of novel information, Ms. Stone. We had nothing to do with either of those deaths. However, investor concerns or not, this conversation is over until I’ve had a chance to consult our attorneys.”

OceanofPDF.com

49

JOHN SAMPSON AND I worked the Drake Conway case at a feverish pace the entire day, well aware of the media storm building to gale force as word of the theology professor's killing spread.

We put in a request to search security footage from the vast federal CCTV network in Washington, DC. We wanted to look for footage of the Georgetown professor near the entrances to Rock Creek Park closest to where his body was set on fire, including the one northwest of the Broadmoor, off Connecticut Avenue, by an entrance to the Reservation 630 trail. Unfortunately, that fell within the perimeter of the White House, and due to a state dinner with the Saudi king the following evening, we would not have access until Wednesday morning at the earliest.

At the same time, we had uniformed officers canvassing residents of the Broadmoor's northeast side, the one facing the park, and we tried to find out everything we could about Drake Conway, the murdered professor.

Gail Grover, chair of the theology department at Georgetown, was crushed when we informed her of Conway's death. She told us that Conway had been at the university for more than thirty years and was respected and well liked by both faculty and students. She described Conway as an affable and intellectually curious man and an excellent teacher whose research was well received.

His wife, Julia, had died of ovarian cancer six years before. They had had no children, and to Grover's knowledge, Conway had no new girlfriend or love interest. He'd lived in a modest duplex off Connecticut Avenue and was something of a loner who spent his free time hiking in national parks around the country.

She gave us the number for Conway's missing iPhone. Sampson and I searched Conway's office and apartment and seized his work and home computers. We turned them and the tablet from his backpack over to our techs for analysis.

A phone number written in pencil on the prior day's page in the professor's Franklin planner proved to belong to a burner phone. Both it and Conway's iPhone had pinged off cell towers in the vicinity of the professor's house and the park shortly after midnight.

According to the late professor's cell provider, he had otherwise not used his iPhone the entire day. The burner phone, however, had pinged off cell towers in Arlington, Virginia, around ten the morning before and then near the Columbia Heights Metro stop in Southeast DC four hours later. A more comprehensive dive into the burner was going to take a warrant.

We explained all this in a meeting with chief of detectives Willard Kane around six p.m., some fifteen hours after the professor's body had been discovered.

Chief Kane said he was under intense pressure from his bosses about Conway's murder, and he assured us that he would get the warrant.

"The media's calling this killer 'the Firebug,'" Kane said, disgusted. "Why do they always have to come up with a name?"

"Storytellers," Sampson said sourly. "It's in their nature."

"Well, it's in my nature and yours to find bad guys with media nicknames," Kane growled. "Solve this case and solve it fast. We can't have people in the nation's capital in a panic that they'll be shot and set on fire, can we?"

"No, sir," Sampson said, the exasperation clear in his voice.

"You have a problem, Detective?" the chief asked.

"I have a problem with the media being all over this case but ignoring the young woman who was killed just the other day. And the one in Northeast DC before her. They were just homeless people. Just throwaways."

"Welcome to reality," Kane said. "Take it up with the journalists. Or their bosses."

"I'd rather watch paint dry, actually."

"How about finding out who did it? Until then, I want both of you on this case twenty-four/seven."

I cleared my throat, held up my hands. "I promise you I will put in long days. But my grandmother, who raised me, is having a tough time. I need to be home at night with her and my family."

"And my daughter takes precedence as well," Sampson said. "Give us

some bodies to pick up the slack, and I guarantee you we will find the killer."

Kane chewed his lower lip. He wasn't happy about it, but he said, "Done. I'll put Tommy Hayes and Judy Winthrop on it as well, reporting to you two. Good?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Thank you, Chief."

But after we left his office, I could see the skepticism in my partner's face.

"Don't know how much enthusiasm we're going to get from the same two detectives who blew off the first killing," he muttered.

"I hear you, but we need the bodies."

Around seven that evening, after talking to Hayes and Winthrop and working out a plan of attack for the morning, Sampson and I went our separate ways.

No one had turned on the outside lights, and my house looked dark from the front. But as soon as I opened the door, I heard people talking and laughing.

In the kitchen, Bree was helping my mother's sister and sister-in-law put the final touches on a meal of roast chicken, red potatoes, and asparagus spears.

In the living room, the night nurses, Bobby and Juanita, were back on duty and taking my grandmother's vital signs. Damon was sitting in a chair by her bed. Ali was on the couch doing homework.

It all looked so calm and nonchaotic after the long, high-pressure day I'd had that I was suddenly exhausted.

Bree came over and gave me a hug and kiss. "You look like you've been through the wringer."

"And a mud pit," I said, gesturing at my shoes, which were still filthy. "How's Nana?"

"Language is still off, but she's gone the last twelve hours without another cardiac episode," Bree said. "Nurses seem happy overall."

She filled me in on her visit to Frost and Lear. "Frost claimed to know nothing about the murders, but he's no dummy. There was something off about the guy. Very smooth, calculating. You and John should go talk to him, but he'll probably be lawyered up by then."

"We'll put a visit high on our list," I said.

Aunt Connie announced that dinner was ready. As we had the night before, we all served ourselves in the kitchen, then gathered in chairs and on the couch near Nana's hospital bed and ate off plates in our laps.

Aunt Connie came over with the meal she'd blended up for Nana to eat.

"She's fit as a fiddle," Juanita said.

"Fiddle crack head," my grandmother said, then frowned. "End of fiddle called?"

"That's called a scroll, Nana," Ali said from the couch.

"Crack scroll fiddle, then," she said. She seemed to notice me. "How Alex?"

I was confused by Nana's strange speech but said, "Tired and very happy to see you."

"Jannie?" Nana Mama asked.

Damon raised his hand. "She ran fast in her first heat. Enough to qualify for the finals tomorrow. She said it will be live on the NCAA site at two p.m."

"No miss," my grandmother said, and then took a spoonful of the puree Aunt Connie had blended. "Eat all time."

After Nana had had her fill, Ali said, "Nana, could you tell us more about your first husband, Walker Arnold?"

"Story there. I not," she said, shifting in her bed. "But, mmm, yes. Difficult."

OceanofPDF.com

50

FOR THE NEXT HOUR, as the night nurses kept a close eye on her, Nana Mama labored to fill us in on this part of her history. She floored us with a few new facts about her life.

After walking out on Walker Arnold and getting an annulment, my grandmother spent some time working as a maid back in Starksville.

“Hard work,” Nana Mama said.

Ali asked, “Nana, why didn’t you go to college then?”

“She was always smart, but it was not easy for a young person to go to college at that time,” Aunt Hattie told him. “Especially not for a young Black woman from a poor family.”

“We’re talking almost eighty years ago, remember!” Aunt Connie chimed in. “That’s why you should be especially proud of your great-grandmother for working so hard and getting her degree from Howard later on. She did that all on her own.”

Nana smiled a little sadly. “That dream.”

My grandmother told us about meeting my paternal grandfather, Reggie Cross, two years after her marriage to Walker Arnold was annulled. He was tall, rugged, and a merchant mariner.

“Like marry man of sea,” she said, and coughed. “Make money. Time, no. Jason born. Something not right Reggie. He say, Make more money. He gone.”

Aunt Hattie said, “Which meant he was away from home and at sea more.”

“Raise baby. Alone. Aunt El. But she old.”

Then Reggie decreased the amount of money he was sending her for rent and groceries, claiming he was having trouble getting on higher-paying crews. To make ends meet, my grandmother went back to work as a cleaner.

“Got me jail almost,” Nana Mama said, sighing.

“You?” I said, shocked at the idea.

Slowly, haltingly, Nana explained that shortly after returning to work cleaning, she was questioned about missing jewelry and silverware at one wealthy household. Of course she hadn't stolen anything, but she knew who had.

"Knew who. Knew why," she said. "Live-in maid, three kids. But I fired."

Bree said, "Why didn't you say anything?"

My grandmother shrugged. "She have mouths feed. Right thing. But hurt."

Nana Mama said it was even more painful a few months later when her aunt Eleanor died, and she discovered that the real reason Reggie had started to be stingy was that he was also giving money to a mistress in Newport News. Shortly after Jason's seventh birthday, she confronted her husband about it, and he'd turned violent.

"Like Walker… Reggie hit. I must think me, my life."

Aunt Connie Lou said, "That was the straw that broke the camel's back, I suppose."

My grandmother lifted her chin and shook her head. "I see papers, bank. Reggie angry. Say me, I good nothing. Clean toilets."

Bree said, "And *that* was the straw that broke it."

"Mmm."

Nana's aunt Eleanor had left her almost a thousand dollars, which was enough back then to finance her first steps to independence. So the day my grandfather left to return to his lover or the sea—she could not remember which—my grandmother packed up her things and, with Jason, boarded a train bound for Washington, DC.

"I cook diner breakfast," Nana recalled. "After I, Jason, walk Howard."

This story I knew because it was part of the family legend. My grandmother was a tiny person even then, barely five feet tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet. But she made sure that the administration and admissions officers knew exactly who she was and what she was doing, which was bettering herself.

Damon said, "And your grit and determination finally won them over."

"Mmm," Nana Mama said. "I get honors, speak, graduate."

I remembered all of Nana's stories and was able to fill in the blanks. My grandmother had refused to settle when it came to her life and her son's.

She’d told me that in too many ways to count, her life was a miracle because of that.

“No forget dreams,” she said hoarsely now. “You become dreams because believe. Up to you. Say life no good? Up to you. Make life masterpiece.”

Silence fell over the room. Finally Damon said with shining eyes, “As far as I’m concerned, Nana, your life was and is a masterpiece.”

“Amen to that,” Aunt Hattie said, and Aunt Connie seconded her.

One of the nurses said, “Bravo,” and began to clap.

And then we were all clapping, me with tears running down my cheeks.

It was a moment and a night I will never forget.

OceanofPDF.com

51

UNDER PRESSURE FROM CHIEF of detectives Willard Kane, who himself was under pressure from the chief of Metro and the mayor, John Sampson and I were back in the office early Tuesday morning and working every lead we had.

I'd left the house happy to hear that Nana Mama had had a restful sleep with no heart issues. And Dr. Ames was going to drop in and see her.

On the way to work, Sampson and I discussed going to Bethesda to see if we could rattle the folks at Frost and Lear but decided to wait a day and instead work the Choir Boy angle hard. We needed to talk to him.

While Detectives Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes read up on the Firebug cases, Sampson and I looked for seminaries in the DC area. There were several, but none had any record of a former seminarian with the first name Aldous.

"He could have cooked up the story of being booted," Sampson said, discouraged. "But why would someone make up a story about getting kicked out of a seminary? Is that a good pickup line these days?"

"Can't see how it would help the pickup or the job search," I said. "Maybe he lied about where he was tossed out. Maybe he changed just enough that he couldn't be tracked."

Winthrop and Hayes came over, looking concerned.

Winthrop, a former college rugby player in her early forties, said, "So Sean Brundage is living under that bridge?"

"He's had a hard road," I said.

"Because he deserved a hard road," said Hayes, a lean former Marine in his late thirties who had facial scarring from acne.

Winthrop said, "He really messed up several of our cases."

"Big-time," Hayes said. "Three got thrown out of court because of his misconduct."

"Good to know," Sampson said.

“You’re looking at him for this, right?” Winthrop said. “Because I would not put something like this past him.”

“Hundred percent,” Hayes replied. “He would be my number one suspect.”

“But not ours,” I said. “Brundage has been nothing but cooperative and helped us understand the dynamics of the homeless camp. And absolutely no one we’ve talked to so far has pointed a finger at him.”

“We’ll see,” Winthrop said, glancing at her partner. “But in the meantime, back to the murder books.”

When they’d walked away, Sampson looked at me. “What do you think?”

“I just said what I thought.”

“Agreed,” John said. “I think their history is clouding their take.”

“Feels like that to me,” I said. “Back to Choir Boy.”

We expanded our search. I focused on the states up north while John looked at those toward the west.

I struck out talking to officials at seminaries in New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Sampson had a similar lack of luck with seminaries in Kentucky, Indiana, West Virginia, and Michigan.

I was about to give up completely when I came across the website for a Trappist monastic order in southern Vermont that supported itself via farming and beer brewing. Those interested in becoming monks spent their first years as novices while preparing to take their vows.

Sounds like a seminary to me. I called the monastery and was put through to the office of Friar Arthur Driscoll.

When the friar answered, I explained who I was and who I was looking for.

A long pause ensued after I said the name Aldous. I was about to ask the friar if he was still on the line, but Friar Driscoll spoke up before I could.

“What’s he done?” Driscoll asked.

“Who are we talking about?” I said. I tried to get Sampson’s attention, but he was focused on his own call, scribbling notes furiously.

“Aldous Campbell, I assume,” the friar said.

“Aldous Campbell,” I said, writing down the full name. “Was he kicked out?”

“He was, three years ago. What’s he done?”

“Nothing that we know of for sure. But we want him for questioning in at least three murders.”

“Murders! Why do you suspect Brother Campbell?”

“We know that he had a connection to at least two of the victims. Why did you kick him out of the seminary?”

After another long pause, Friar Driscoll cleared his throat and said, “Brother Campbell revealed a… fondness for the beer we brew here and was warned. Then he was found with pornography and was warned again. Then he was caught torturing one of the farm animals we keep here on the grounds. Three strikes and you’re out.”

I closed my eyes, feeling in my bones that Choir Boy was our killer. Serial killers often begin by acting out their sadistic fantasies on defenseless animals. Humans come later.

“Tell me everything you can about Aldous Campbell,” I said. As I listened, I heard Sampson thank someone, then immediately make another call.

I spoke with Friar Driscoll for another fifteen minutes and hung up feeling like we were about to blow the case wide open. I stood up and pumped my fist just as Sampson ended his call and made the same gesture.

“We just caught a big break,” he said.

“You have no idea how big,” I replied.

OceanofPDF.com

52

JOHN SAMPSON FROWNED. “ARE we both talking about the defrocked Reverend Dylan Sentinel, recently of Roanoke?”

“Who? No. I’m referring to the booted novice Aldous Campbell, recently of a Trappist monastery near Putney, Vermont.”

“You actually got Choir Boy?” he said, breaking into a grin. “You’re up first, then.”

I gave him the highlights of my chat with Friar Driscoll: Orphaned at six and a product of the New Hampshire foster-care system, Aldous Campbell had come to the grounds of the Trappist order at age nineteen. He’d openly admitted to a checkered past in his interview with Driscoll, having been arrested once for shoplifting and once for abetting grand theft auto. But he’d expressed an intense desire to lead a monastic life.

“The friar said Campbell seemed very smart and earnest about taking his vows,” I said. “Oh, and apparently, he’s a great singer, a tenor. He sang so well, the monastery choir gave him a solo during his first Christmas Mass.”

“Doesn’t sound like a serial killer.”

“Give me a sec,” I said, then recounted what Driscoll had told me: Campbell was repeatedly inebriated, was found with porn on an iPad he wasn’t supposed to have, and had tortured and then strangled one of the farm animals the monastery kept, a piglet.

“After the piglet incident, the friar gave Campbell the toss. That was three years ago, and they haven’t heard from him since,” I said.

“Alcohol, pornography, and animal abuse?” Sampson shook his head. “That’s not good.”

“We know where it can lead,” I agreed. “So who’s the defrocked Reverend Dylan Sentinel?”

“Our victim in the Audi under the ghost ramp,” Sampson told me. “Boog was right about the collar. We got a DNA match. And Sentinel was evidently a real piece of work.”

The DNA match also triggered a hit on a missing person report that had been filed by Reverend Sentinel's sister. Sampson had just gotten off the phone with the detective working the minister's disappearance.

Sentinel was forty-nine years old, a native of Tampa, Florida, and a Methodist minister with a troubling past.

According to the detective, the reverend's career had started out with noble intentions. After graduating from a theological school in Florida with a reputation for delivering stirring sermons about the plight of the poor, he'd eschewed offers of ministerial positions in affluent suburbs and instead turned the streets into his ministry, working to shelter and feed homeless people in Jacksonville and then Atlanta.

"Homeless people?"

"I hear you. Give me a sec," Sampson said. "His ministry was doing well, attracting followers and donors—but then he was accused of groping a sixteen-year-old homeless girl."

"Ouch."

"Sentinel skated on the charge when the girl recanted, saying she must have mistaken a hug for a grope," Sampson said. "Then two years later, a homeless woman in her thirties said Sentinel exposed himself to her and tried to rape her."

That was enough to rattle his nonprofit board in Atlanta. They cut him loose, and he moved on to Philadelphia, where he was evidently charming enough to convince people there that the charges were false.

"And all was well until…"

"Until he couldn't help himself, apparently," said Sampson. "About eight months after Sentinel arrived in Philly, he got caught in a vice sting and was arrested for trying to pay for sex with a cop posing online as a sixteen-year-old runaway."

"Sounds like Corey McGovern."

"Just wait," John said. "The good reverend weaseled his way out of it because the detectives running the sting were caught on their own cameras giving Sentinel an improper Miranda warning."

"Idiocy."

"Still got him booted from the homeless work he was doing in Philadelphia."

Shortly after, Sentinel moved to Roanoke, Virginia, where he was again

caught in an attempted-rape incident, this one involving him convincing an underage girl to let him film her in the nude. But the girl went missing before the trial, and once again, the case did not go to court.

“It was enough for the church elders,” John said. “Sentinel was officially expelled. His sister filed the missing person report about two weeks ago.”

“Got a picture of him?”

“Several,” Sampson said. He showed me a few photographs on his phone of Dylan Sentinel. He was a handsome man with flecks of gray in his hair. “Recognize him?”

“I don’t,” I said. “But the profile could match the first guy who went into Corey’s room the night of the thunderstorm.”

OceanofPDF.com

53

JOHN SAMPSON AND I gave Chief Willard Kane and Detectives Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes an update on our progress. We identified the victim beneath the Bridge to Nowhere as Dylan Sentinel, a defrocked minister with a history of sexual violence, and told them Choir Boy was Aldous Campbell, a booted novice with a taste for beer, porn, and abusing defenseless animals.

"Jesus," Kane said, rubbing his brow. "And the professor at Georgetown?"

"No history of sexual fixations or violence that we know of," I said.

"But he was also shot and burned," Winthrop said.

"He was indeed."

Sampson said, "Chief, at this point we believe that all of the murders are the work of the same killer."

Detective Hayes said, "Corey McGovern could be the crossover."

"I don't follow," I said.

"You said that your Choir Boy, Aldous Campbell, was a customer of Corey McGovern's, and Dylan Sentinel might've been as well," he replied impatiently. "I think you're going to find out that Drake Conway was her client too. And probably Sean Brundage."

"I'd bet on it," Winthrop said.

I said firmly, "We've got nothing that says Brundage knew her in any way other than seeing her below the ghost ramp with Choir Boy and Hawk."

Hayes said, "Okay, but with or without Brundage, this could all be a case of jealousy gone wild, one of Corey's clients becoming so infatuated with her that he couldn't stand the idea of another man having her."

Sampson said, "I could see that. Jealousy leading him to kill and burn her other clients."

I said, "And then he follows her to the Avid Eyeball. Maybe she suspects

he's a murderer?"

"Or maybe she spurns him there," Chief Kane said. "And in a fit of rage, he shoots her and sets her on fire."

Sampson said, "And then, what, he keeps on killing even after Corey's dead? Why kill Conway?"

"Maybe in his mind, he's cleaning up," Winthrop said. "Eliminating them all."

"Assuming Conway was even a client," Sampson noted.

The COD said, "What are we missing?"

"More like *who* are we missing, Chief," I said. "We still haven't located Aldous Campbell. We have no idea where Choir Boy went after seeing Corey McGovern. And when you watch the security footage from the Fall Flower Motel, Alejandro Rodriguez, the ex–Special Forces guy, is the last to seek her favors."

Sampson told them that Hawk's whereabouts were unknown for eight hours after he left McGovern's room, which theoretically gave him more than enough time to find Reverend Sentinel, kidnap him in his own car, drive him to the Bridge to Nowhere, kill him, torch him, and walk back to the motel.

Kane looked at me. "You think that's what happened, Dr. Cross?"

I squinted one eye. "It's plausible, so maybe. But there are things unaccounted for with that theory."

"Such as?" Sampson said, raising an eyebrow.

"The fuel. The avgas," I said. "Was it Reverend Sentinel's? Or was it Hawk's? And where did it come from?"

Detective Winthrop said, "Killer could have hid it somewhere beforehand. Maybe right there below the ramp."

"Lot of maybes to run down," I said. "And I have more to add to that list. Like, where's Choir Boy now? Is he dead? Is that why we haven't found him? Where's Hawk? Why did he run? And we still don't know who the first victim was—the one behind the abandoned building Frost and Lear owns in Northeast. That makes four murder victims: the unknown vic, Dylan Sentinel, Corey McGovern, and Drake Conway."

Before anyone could reply, Sampson's cell phone buzzed. He looked down at the screen. "It's a text from Boog."

"Bug?" Kane asked, sounding irritated.

“Robert Bogner, Chief, a thirteen-year-old kid who calls himself Boog and lives under that ghost ramp,” Sampson said. “He says, quote, ‘Bing Bang, one of Hawk’s bad trolls, just showed up. BB is crazy and disappeared when Audi burned.’ Boog also says, ‘I’m hungry, Detective.’”

He looked up at us, shaking his head. “Jesus, kid’s thirteen, abandoned, and he has no idea where his next meal’s coming from.”

“I hear you,” I said. “Why don’t we go talk to Bing Bang about Hawk and buy young Mr. Bogner some food on the way.”

OceanofPDF.com

54

BOOG WAS WAITING FOR us behind the lumberyard, well away from the Bridge to Nowhere, which loomed in the background above the brush.

After putting Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes to work on other aspects of the Drake Conway murder investigation, John Sampson had texted Boog and told him we were on our way with takeout. Now the hungry kid snatched the McDonald's bag from John, peered in, and grinned.

"Nuggets!" he said. "And so many fries. And is this cherry Coke? Thank you, Detective!"

"You're welcome. Your mom hasn't shown up yet?"

Boog stuffed fries into his mouth, then took a long sip of Coke. "She's on her way," he said. "Told me she'd be here day after tomorrow at the latest. Coming by bus from Chicago, which I guess is where we're gonna go live next. Did you know they have a lot of blues bands there? I'm going to see some. Mom said so."

John glanced at me in a way that told me he thought the kid was full of it.

I said, "Tell us about Bing Bang."

Boog said that, like a lot of the homeless guys Hawk surrounded himself with, Bing Bang had been in the military and went from the field to the streets. The guy's real name was O'Hare, but "Bing Bang" was his war handle.

O'Hare was big like Rodriguez, plus he carried a knife and was very fast with it. While Boog wolfed down chicken nuggets, he told us that Bing Bang was generally eager for a fight, but he'd run anytime the cops came under the ramp.

He said, "He always goes out the same way—up through the hole in the ramp above the camp on that side, then down the ramp to where barriers close off the low end. He vaults them and he's gone for a few days. That's what he did after the Audi burned."

I said, “But you say he’s in there now?”

“Up in high-troll town, arguing with the guy who’s trying to take Hawk’s place.”

“Damn it,” Sampson said. “That’s Brundage. Wait for us here, kid.”

We left Boog devouring his meal and ran to the Bridge to Nowhere. Soon, we heard shouts coming from beneath the ramp on the south embankment. As we got closer, we saw that almost everyone in the camp was looking up toward the shouting.

Everyone except Lainey Locket, the high troll of the north embankment. Locket was watching us from her perch high on the girder jutting out of the upper ramp.

“Let’s take Boog’s word for it that O’Hare will run,” I told Sampson, panting, before we broke free of the brush there. “I’ll flush him.”

“And I’ll sit on the escape route.”

We were still being ignored by everyone except Locket when we reached the shade of the ramp. All heads were craned up to see whether the raging argument was going to turn violent.

Sampson jogged past the burned remnants of the crime scene and vanished into the brush to the south, and I climbed up to where two people were shouting at each other.

“I’ll cut you before I let you have that spot!” The speaker, a big, balding dude, was right up under the ramp and facing Sean Brundage, who was in a fighting crouch. *This must be Bing Bang*.

“Not before I lay you open,” the ex-cop roared. “It’s mine! You and yours left!”

Brundage wielded a piece of rebar in his right hand. His left hand was wrapped in some kind of fabric. O’Hare carried a large lock-blade knife that he waved in the air menacingly. Then he lunged.

Brundage batted the knife away with his padded hand and swung hard at O’Hare’s forearm with the rebar. But Bing Bang was quick, and it only brushed him.

I drew my service weapon and shouted, “Police! Drop your weapons!”

Bing Bang did not even look my way. He just spun in his tracks, crouched over, and sprinted to the rubble below the hole in the underside of the ramp. I charged up the last three levels and aimed my weapon at Brundage.

“Drop it, Sean,” I said.

“He’s getting away!” Brundage yelled as O’Hare scrambled up into the hole. “That’s Hawk’s right-hand man.”

“John’s waiting for him,” I said. “Drop the rebar.”

The former detective shrugged and tossed it aside. “Self-defense. He charged me, tried to throw me out. That’s just the way it is here.”

“His name’s O’Hare?”

Brundage nodded. “Colin ‘Bing Bang’ O’Hare. Did multiple tours in Afghanistan like Hawk. Got his bell rung a few too many times. He gets angry and goes for that knife at the slightest provocation—if a mosquito bites him, he pulls it out.”

“Where does he go when he runs?”

“Got me. I’m not the guy’s keeper. I am no one’s keeper.”

With the prospect of a fight diminished, the people who’d been tuned in started drifting off. I asked quietly, “You don’t stay in touch with your family at all, Sean?”

The ex-cop looked away. “They’re better off without me, Cross.”

“You might be surprised.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, then gestured with his chin down the embankment. “Nice work, bird dog.”

I saw Sampson leading Colin O’Hare away in handcuffs. Most people were dwarfed when they stood next to Sampson, who was six nine and weighed around two seventy-five. But Bing Bang was almost as tall as my partner and maybe twenty pounds heavier.

“We might have more questions,” I said.

“Well, you know where to find me,” Brundage said and went back to building his shelter on Hawk’s spot. “Head high troll. Lord of all I survey.”

OceanofPDF.com

55

COLIN O'HARE WAS SPITTING angry when I got to the bottom of the south embankment. "What is this, man?" he said, glaring at me. "I didn't do nothing."

"You tried to stab a man, Colin, then you ran from the police," I said. "People who run have things to hide."

"I just don't like cops. No offense," Bing Bang said. "And that dude has no right to Hawk's spot. If anybody has a right, it's me."

Sampson nudged him out from under the ramp and into the intense sun, and we walked toward the alley behind the lumberyard.

Boog was sitting on a rock to our right, his back against a chain-link fence, still eating and trying not to look our way. O'Hare's attention fixed on the kid for a moment before we led him to our squad car.

"Do I have to go downtown?" Bing Bang said when we opened the back door. "I mean, can't you just ask your questions right here? I got nothing to hide, man."

"Okay," I said. "Were you here the morning the car was set on fire?"

"Heard it blow, decided to leave for a bit when I heard the sirens," O'Hare said. "Loud sounds. Can't stand them."

"Where did you go? The Fall Flower?"

He stiffened a little. "Yeah. I was there two or three nights, then caught a bunk at the men's shelter downtown when I ran out of cash."

"Where's Hawk?"

"No clue," O'Hare said. "Seriously, I'm surprised he took off like that."

Sampson asked, "Know Corey McGovern?"

"Heard she's dead."

"Shot and set on fire, just like the guy here."

"Sorry to hear it. She was cute, funny."

"Did you have a thing for Corey?" I asked. "Ever pay her for sex?"

He hesitated, then said, "Maybe once."

Sampson asked, “You know Aldous Campbell?”

O’Hare gave him a blank stare.

“People call him Choir Boy,” I said.

The man relaxed, even smiled a little.

“Yeah, I know Choir Boy,” he said. “That is one whacked dude. A psycho, if you ask me, and he could not get enough of that Corey. Real obsessed. Shoot and burn someone? Oh, yeah. You take these cuffs off and I’ll tell you all about him.”

Sampson said, “You thinking of running, Bing Bang?”

“Where would I go? I’m homeless, man.”

“You run, and I will clobber you when I catch up,” my partner said as he took the cuffs off O’Hare.

“Heard and appreciated,” Bing Bang said, rubbing his wrists.

“About Choir Boy,” I said. “Tell us everything.”

O’Hare corroborated what Hawk had told us and expanded on that information. Campbell had been kicked out of some religious school, O’Hare said, and when he got drunk, he blamed God.

“He’d get hammered and curse God and everyone who believed in Jesus. All Christians, you know.”

“I get it,” I said, thinking about Dylan Sentinel. “Have you ever seen Choir Boy get violent?”

“Saw the son of a bitch when he was on a bender damn near kick a dog to death because it knocked over his booze and stole some food,” O’Hare said. “He did not care, that’s how low he goes. You’ll see what he’s like.”

Sampson said, “You know where we can find him?”

The man smiled. “I know where he’ll be right before six o’clock. Would that information help square things between us, Detectives?”

“Depends on how good your information is.”

“Man, I would not steer you wrong. Ask around. I’m a straight shooter.”

I fought the urge to look back at Boog, who’d given us a different appraisal of the vet. “Where will Choir Boy be just before six?”

“Where he always is at that time on Tuesday,” O’Hare said. “Outside St. Anthony’s soup kitchen, waiting for them to open. It’s lasagna night, and he loves that lasagna almost as much as he loved that Corey girl.”

OceanofPDF.com

56

I CHECKED MY WATCH. It was a quarter past one.

Colin O'Hare was right about several things. The doors at St. Anthony's kitchen opened for evening meals at six on the dot. And Tuesday night was always lasagna made by Lorraine and Stella D'Angelo, Italian twin sisters in the parish, and it was very, very good. Even Nana Mama thought so. She had tried to pry the recipe out of them, to no avail; all they said was "It's a secret."

My phone alarm went off. I pulled out my cell, puzzled, then remembered that my track-star daughter had a meet coming up.

"Jannie's race is starting soon," I said to Sampson. "Shall we let him walk?"

"C'mon, I just put Choir Boy in your lap," O'Hare said to Sampson.

"Tell you what," Sampson replied. "You come meet us at St. Anthony's at quarter of six. Point him out and we're good. If you're not there, we're coming back for you."

"I'll be there. I like lasagna," the vet said. "Five forty-five. See you men soon."

He did not wait for a reply, just hurried back toward the Bridge to Nowhere. We stood there watching as he paused in front of Boog and said something to him; the teen just shrugged and balled up his McDonald's bag.

O'Hare said something else and disappeared down the path. Sampson gave Boog a thumbs-up, and the kid hesitated and then returned it.

"Isn't he supposed to be in school today?" I asked.

"Yep," John replied. "I'm calling child protective services as soon as we get to your house to watch Jannie's run."

Twelve minutes later, we hurried up my front porch steps.

My aunts were heating up leftovers for lunch. Damon was in the kitchen on his laptop, as was Bree, who was still trying to learn more about what Frost and Lear was doing with its real estate holdings.

Sampson and I brought her up to speed on the day's developments. "So Choir Boy is going to be at St. Anthony's later?" she said. "Good to know."

"Tuesday lasa," Nana Mama croaked from her bed as I went into the great room to check on her.

"That's right. Lasagna night at St. Anthony's. How are you, old lady?"

"Don't know," she said, and I looked at the day nurses.

One of them, a tall woman named Shirley Mason, said, "She's had a couple of spells where her heart's gotten a little wobbly, but then she bounces back and she's okay. Dr. Ames says that her head wound is healing beautifully, and her appetite's strong."

"Hungry," Nana said. "Food."

"Right here," Aunt Hattie said, coming out of the kitchen with a tray. "You get a little of everything. Including the last of yesterday's peach pie."

As the other nurse, a short woman named Florence Cooper, helped Nana eat, Shirley told me that a speech pathologist named Betsy Jackson had come in earlier and spent two hours doing a preliminary exam. She recommended therapy twice a week and would return in the morning. Jackson believed that, due to either the fall or the stroke, Nana was suffering from Broca's aphasia. According to the report the speech pathologist left for us, this meant that much of her language had been reduced to telegraphic speech—short sentence fragments—and she had frequent episodes of being unable to retrieve the right words.

"Getting to be time, Alex," Sampson called.

"Got it already teed up," Damon said, coming in with his laptop. He turned on our big television on the wall. "And that should mirror—"

The screen jumped to show NCAA.com and the streaming feed from the northeast regional track finals, live from Rutgers University in New Jersey. The focus was on the men's javelin at first. Then the camera jumped to athletes taking their places in the stagger for the women's four-hundred-meter finals.

"Jannie," my grandmother said. "Lane. Good?"

"Very," I said. "She likes to be in two, three, or four, and she has three."

Bree nodded. "She says it helps motivate her to chase the girls in the outer lanes."

"She hates being in lane eight," I said.

"No one to chase?" Sampson said, coming into the room with a plate.

“I used to run track,” Shirley Mason said. “Your girl looks loose. Confident. And she’s a record holder, you said?”

Damon said, “She set the national high-school record as a freshman.” He was always ready to brag on his sister.

“Is that right?”

“Right,” my grandmother said, nodding.

“She’s at Howard?” Florence Cooper set aside her files and turned to watch as well. “I went to Howard. She got a chance to win this?”

“If she wants to go to the NCAA finals, she has to be in the top four,” I said.

Damon said, “Jannie says the favorites are a girl from Penn State, a senior who was fourth at nationals last year, and a junior from UConn, who was sixth. They’re in lanes five and six.”

The camera pulled back as the athletes settled into their blocks. “On your marks. Set.”

We all watched the screen, transfixed, as Jannie coiled up, put her fingertips on the track, raised her head, lowered it, and listened, eyes on the ground. At the crack of the gun, she exploded forward, head still down, driving with her legs and chopping the air with her open hands.

OceanofPDF.com

57

“STAY WITH IT, JANNIE! Stay down!” I shouted, feeling tense and then relieved when Jannie didn’t succumb to one of her few bad habits: bringing her head up and trying to find top speed too soon.

Instead, Jannie came erect almost as if she were a bird swooping upward on a wind thermal. At the eighty-meter mark, the loping started.

That’d always been the unusual thing about my daughter when she raced the four hundred. At a certain point, she was no longer sprinting or even running. She loped through the next section of the race, her long legs chewing up ground, her stride widening, her turnover quickening between one hundred twenty and one hundred eighty meters.

Somewhere in that backstretch, Jannie left loping behind and began to bound in pursuit of the leaders.

The UConn and Penn State runners were just ahead of my daughter, no more than a meter, when Jannie started to put more spring into every foot strike. Her head, shoulders, and torso seemed to lift and hover quite still above the track while her legs blurred below her.

As they came down the last of the backstretch and entered the turn, the speed of Jannie’s turnover picked up. She and the young woman from UConn left the Penn State athlete behind. Jannie stayed right off the UConn runner’s left shoulder coming out of the curve.

“C’mon!” Aunt Connie cried.

“Do it, Jannie!” Damon yelled.

The UConn athlete dug deep and held off my daughter’s attempt to get past her. I thought Jannie was done.

But with thirty yards to go, she surged again.

“She’s got this!” Bree shouted.

The two runners were neck and neck, chest and chest, stride and stride all the way to the lean at the finish line, where the UConn girl got Jannie by a hundredth of a second.

“Oh!” Nana Mama said. “Oh.”

Her monitor began to make angry chirping noises. We all spun to see the nurses busy around her.

“A little too much time not breathing,” one nurse said, adjusting the cannula on her oxygen line. “Take deep, slow breaths now.”

Nana took two big inhales and then another. “She win? Jannie?”

“She got second! Which means she’s in!” I said, grinning at her. “She’ll be going to Notre Dame for the NCAA finals!”

“Got dream,” my grandmother said, beaming. “We go? Watch?”

“A little over a week from now. Let’s see what Dr. Ames says. It’s a pretty long drive.”

“Go,” Nana Mama said firmly. “No wait ask God. This dream now.”

“It’s a good dream, Nana,” Damon said. “I think we should all go.”

Sampson said, “Willow and I will be there.”

“Everyone,” my grandmother said, smiling as she closed her eyes. “I be.”

For a few hours, anyway, everything felt good and right and full of hope in the Cross household.

OceanofPDF.com

58

JOHN SAMPSON AND I made it to St. Anthony's Catholic Church around five thirty that afternoon. Nine people were already standing in line behind the aluminum grate that led to the basement.

But no Colin O'Hare or Aldous Campbell.

The guy at the front of the line, who could have been thirty or fifty, got lippy with us when we asked him to stand aside so we could go down to the basement. Then Sampson showed him his badge, and the man's lips slammed shut.

Downstairs in the kitchen, we found Lorraine D'Angelo busy tossing a Caesar salad in a huge mixing bowl while her sister, Stella, checked on long loaves of garlic bread browning in the oven. The air smelled so good, I could've been in a world-class Italian restaurant.

Sampson said, "You ladies should open your own place."

Lorraine and Stella were in their early seventies, and like a lot of twins, they often finished each other's sentences.

"Our parents spent their whole lives in the family restaurant in Boston's North End," Lorraine said. "It was—"

"Too much work," Stella said. "We don't mind working hard, but—"

"Mama and Pop never left the place. Seven days a week," Lorraine said. "We—"

"Didn't want that life for ourselves," Stella said. "Our cousin Victor. He took it."

The D'Angelo sisters had worked at St. Anthony's School as teachers before they retired. They'd known my grandmother for decades. I told them about her recent health challenges.

They were very concerned and offered to deliver dinner to the house the following week, which I accepted. I knew that Nana would appreciate seeing them—and she'd appreciate their cooking even more.

"Time we headed back outside," Sampson said, checking his watch.

“Right behind you.”

The line of hungry people had grown to thirty in the past ten minutes, with more coming across the intersections to our south and north. Colin O’Hare was there now, about halfway down the line. He had his back against a lamppost and was sucking a lollipop.

When Bing Bang saw us, he pulled the candy from his mouth and shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said.

“When was the last time he was a no-show?”

“No clue, man. Usually he’s right there at the front.”

The line had doubled in size when Lorraine D’Angelo came up from the basement and opened the grate.

“Take it easy, no pushing,” she said. “There’s more than enough. Wait your turn, now.” The people in line thanked her as they passed, and Lorraine had a kind word for all of them.

“That lady is a good person,” O’Hare said when she went downstairs to help her sister. “Glad there are a few left like her.”

“We are too,” Sampson said. A moment later, he leaned toward me and said, “There’s Anna Bananas.”

I looked where he was pointing and saw Anna, her nine-year-old son, Luke, and her fourteen-year-old daughter, Emma, at the back of the line. I strolled down to see them while Sampson waited with O’Hare for Choir Boy.

“Hi, Anna,” I said. I smiled at her kids. “Emma. Luke.”

“Pop-pop-pop, we’re late again,” Anna said. “Just the end pieces left.”

Luke said, “I like the end pieces.”

“Me too,” Emma said. “There’s always sausage in them.”

I went with them as the line moved toward the entrance to the kitchen, showing them the best photo we had of Aldous Campbell. “You ever seen this guy around?”

Emma glanced at the photo, frowned, and shook her head. “No.”

“I’ve seen him. Both here and under the bridge,” Anna said, looking at her daughter. “You’ve seen him.”

Emma glanced at the picture again. “I don’t think so, Mom.”

Luke said, “He’s usually at the front of the line for lasagna.”

His sister shrugged and studied the sidewalk.

OceanofPDF.com

59

I MADE A NOTE of the teenager's reaction and then showed them the picture of Corey McGovern on the stoop in Georgetown.

Anna Stein squinted. "Can't say."

Her daughter studied the picture, chewed the inside of her cheek. "She lived on the other side sometimes. Under the bridge."

"With Hawk?"

At the mention of Hawk, Emma looked at the sidewalk again. "Yeah, maybe with him. Why? Who is she?"

"Her name is Corey McGovern. She's dead."

Emma gazed up at me in shock. "What? When? How?"

"A few nights ago," I said. "She was shot and burned like the guy in the Audi."

The fourteen-year-old's hand trembled as it traveled to her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"No," she moaned, shaking her head.

Her mother said, "Emma, did you know her?"

Emma wiped at her tears and nodded. "A little. I saw her a couple of times with that guy Hawk."

Her mother said, "Pop-pop-pop. Someone killing street people, Detective?"

It was a valid question, but I shook my head. "No, I think it's something else. We're still trying to figure out the connections among the victims, but I don't think homeless people are being targeted specifically." I pulled up a photo of the defrocked minister. "How about him?"

Anna Bananas nodded. "He came around a few times a couple of months ago, giving out sandwiches. A reverend, I think."

"He gave me cookies," Luke said.

Emma went stone-faced. "I saw him too. He said he was starting some mission among the homeless."

“He was the guy in the Audi,” I told them.

I watched for their reaction and saw only bewilderment.

“Why him?” Anna asked.

I heard organ music swell inside the church and realized we were almost to the stairwell of the basement cafeteria. “Go eat. We’ll talk later.”

Anna smiled, put her hand on my cheek. “Pop-pop-pop. Thank you for caring about people like us, Detective.”

“‘People like us’ are exactly the same as anyone,” I said. “You’re just a little down on your luck.”

“C’mon, I’m starving, guys,” Luke moaned.

“Follow me, little man,” Emma said, taking her brother by the hand and looking relieved that our conversation was over.

Anna studied her daughter’s back for a moment before following her down the stairs. Inside the church, a man began to sing in Latin.

I turned to look for Sampson and O’Hare and saw there were maybe fifteen people left in line. None of them was Aldous Campbell. John and Bing Bang were still standing by the streetlamp.

“Looks like Choir Boy found something better than lasagna,” I said, walking up.

Sampson said, “Or maybe we’re going to find him burned to a crisp somewhere.”

“Nah, man,” O’Hare said, amused. “I’m betting he somehow snuck by us and already has a bellyful of lasagna.”

Before we could ask Bing Bang to explain, he pointed up at the stained-glass windows of the Catholic church, which were vibrating with the sound of the organ and the clear tenor voice singing a psalm.

“That’s him,” O’Hare said. “I’d know Choir Boy’s voice anywhere.”

OceanofPDF.com

60

WE MOVED DOWN THE street, heading for the main entrance to the church. Colin O'Hare called after us, "We good, then?"

John Sampson waved his hand. I looked over my shoulder and nodded.

Bing Bang stepped behind the last people in line, not wanting to miss his chance for the remaining lasagna.

The big oak doors at the front of the church were unlocked. We went through into the vestibule and heard Choir Boy's voice overpowering the organ.

I wasn't familiar with the song, but every note seemed pitch perfect. We headed up the staircase to the organ and choir loft.

"This dude can really sing!" Sampson murmured behind me.

"Like a pro," I replied softly as I reached for my badge.

We stepped onto the big balcony above the empty church and at long last spotted Aldous Campbell in the flesh.

His face was grimy, as were his clothes. There was a half-empty pint of gin beside him on the organ bench, and bits of leaves stuck out from his wild mop of curls, but Choir Boy's long delicate fingers on the organ's keys were scrubbed clean. He played, eyes closed, swept up in the moment and singing like some improbable lost angel.

I was mesmerized and stood there stunned by his talent. Sampson, his badge out and his hand on his service weapon, went around me and called, "Aldous Campbell?"

Choir Boy seemed not to hear and kept singing. Sampson said, louder and more insistent, "Aldous Campbell? Choir Boy?"

The organ and that remarkable tenor voice fell silent.

Campbell kept his fingers on the keys as he turned his head slowly toward us, eyes bloodshot. Slurring slightly, he said, "I'm allowed to be here. It makes the old Italian ladies happy. They always let me come up to play music after I eat."

Sampson ignored Choir Boy's comments. "We're homicide detectives with Metro PD, Mr. Campbell," he said, holding up his ID, his other hand still on his pistol. "I'm John Sampson. This is Dr. Alex Cross."

Campbell's bleary eyes traveled to me with some interest.

"We'd like to talk to you," I said.

"I'm right here," he said, picking up the bottle and taking a swig. "Talk away."

"Ease up on the booze there, Choir Boy," Sampson said. "This is dead serious, and you'll want to be clearheaded answering our questions."

Campbell snorted derisively. "Been a minute since I've been clearheaded, Detective. Months of minutes. What's going on?"

"You have a place to stay, Mr. Campbell?" I asked, trying to put him at ease with softball questions.

"Here and there," he said amiably. "You know how it is."

"I don't. I have never been homeless."

He took another sip of gin. "Alex Cross. You're that cop with the big degree, right? Knows all about criminal minds?"

"I have a PhD in psychology," I confirmed.

"Thought it was you. So you *do* know how it is, having someone close to you go to the streets like that." I felt my brows knit as he continued. "You got a brother named Charlie, right?"

I got a weird feeling in my chest. "I do. We… aren't in touch. What about him?"

Looking like he thought he had the upper hand now, Aldous Campbell took another swig of the gin and said, "The way he told it, his girl left him a couple years back, family won't talk to him, and he lost his job. He didn't have to fall far to end up just like me."

My stomach sank and all the guilt and anger I felt about my fractured relationship with my only surviving brother pounded me in waves.

"You're saying Charlie's homeless?"

"He was getting by the last time I saw him. Got a sleeping bag, few tarps," Choir Boy said. "He was squatting with me and some other folks in a place up in Northeast before the cops threw us all out."

My heart began to race.

Sampson asked Campbell, "When was this?"

He thought, squinted, then said, "Maybe a week before the cops came?

They cleared everyone out after some poor SOB got set on fire in the lot behind the building."

Questions erupted in my head that felt like punches to the inside of my skull. I looked over at Sampson and saw from his face that the same harsh possibility had occurred to him.

"You didn't see Charlie leave?" I asked.

Campbell hesitated, then shook his head. "I do remember seeing his stuff was still there on the third floor when we got rousted."

"But you didn't see him in the days leading up to the guy's death?"

Campbell appeared confused. "I was just there off and on, you know. I could've missed him."

"How about on the night the guy was killed?" Sampson asked. "Were you there then?"

"Yeah, but I didn't hear a thing. Gin before beddy-bye will do that."

"Can anyone confirm that you were there?"

"Before dark, probably someone saw me. After?" Campbell shrugged. "Can't see much at that point in a place with no electricity."

I said, "But you definitely did not see Charlie there that night."

"I did not that night and had not for a week, give or take."

The human mind has a tendency to jump to the worst conclusions, and even when you know that, it does not stop it from happening. My thoughts immediately leapfrogged all logic, fact, and theory to the worst possibilities.

Was my brother Charlie homeless?

Was he the man who was shot and burned behind that condemned building?

Was my own brother the very first victim?

OceanofPDF.com

61

AS MUCH AS MY head and heart ached from these speculative questions about my brother Charlie, we had come here to ask Aldous Campbell about the other cases.

I pushed my concerns about Charlie down for a moment and said, “Mr. Campbell, where were you last Thursday night, the night of the big thunderstorms?”

Choir Boy squinted. “Under the bridge.”

“Try again,” John Sampson said. “You’re on security footage from the Fall Flower Motel that evening.”

“Well, maybe earlier that evening,” he said.

“You saw Corey McGovern earlier that evening at the Fall Flower,” I said.

“I guess that’s right.”

John asked, “You pay her for sex?”

“That’s how it usually goes with a hooker,” Campbell said, a smile coming to his lips.

I said, “She was fifteen.”

The smile fell. “Not a chance,” he said. “I checked her ID myself.”

“Fake.”

He got defensive. “Well, I had no idea. I mean, I’m no forgery expert.”

Sampson said, “Folks say you were obsessed with Corey.”

“Obsessed? No.”

“How many times did you pay her for sex?”

Choir Boy looked at us, then around the church. “A bunch of times, I guess. Whenever I had enough to see her.”

I said, “You knew Corey had other clients.”

He shrugged. “I’m not stupid.”

“Make you angry?” Sampson asked.

Campbell tilted his head. “No. What’s this about?”

“I think it did make you angry. I think you hated it, Choir Boy. Maybe enough to target her other clients.”

“Target?” he repeated, frowning. He sipped from the gin.

Sampson said, “Like that reverend who was with Corey an hour before you were.”

“What reverend?”

“The one you shot and lit on fire in an Audi under the Bridge to Nowhere.”

That sobered Choir Boy up big-time. He set the gin bottle down on the organ bench. “I didn’t shoot no one and I didn’t light anyone on fire. I don’t hurt people, man. The only person I hurt is myself.”

Sampson looked at me and nodded slightly.

I picked up the questioning. “That’s not how we hear it, Aldous. I spoke with Friar Driscoll at the Trappist monastery in Vermont.”

Campbell’s lips twisted in disgust. “That asshole. What did he say?”

“He told me that you strangled a piglet.”

That infuriated Campbell. He jumped to his feet and sputtered, tears coming down his cheeks, “That is an out-and-out lie! It was snowing and that piglet got out of the pen and was almost frozen to death when I found it. I was drunk, but I still knew what to do.”

Choir Boy claimed he took the piglet into the barn, wrapped it in a horse blanket, and attempted to revive it. He gave it CPR when it stopped breathing, but he couldn’t save it.

“That’s when Brother Glazier, one of the monks who didn’t like me, came into the barn. He saw me working on the pig, smelled the booze on my breath, and told everyone that I’d strangled it. That was a lie, and I have been telling people that ever since. I did not kill that little pig, man. And I for sure did not kill some deviant reverend who was screwing Corey.”

“What makes you say that the reverend was a deviant?” Sampson asked.

The man shot him a look, said, “I assume he was breaking his vows, being with Corey like that. So—deviant.”

He had us there.

“Where did you go after seeing Corey the night of the storm?” I asked, changing tack. “You didn’t stay at the Fall Flower?”

“Nah, I’d spent all my cash on seeing Corey. I didn’t have enough for a room. Like I said, I stayed under the bridge.”

“So you were there when the Audi exploded?”

He nodded. “Heard it blow and saw it burn.”

“Where were you sleeping?”

“I was in Hawk’s shelter, high up.”

“Why were you in his place?” Sampson asked.

“He said I could crash there because he was staying at the Fall Flower.”

I said, “To have sex with Corey also.”

That seemed to surprise Campbell. “Okay. He did not tell me that.”

“When was the next time you saw him?”

“That morning, man, after the Audi went up. He came in through the hole in the ramp and said it was time for me to get going. So I did.”

My mind raced as I compared Campbell’s version of events with Hawk’s. “Did you see each other before the car was set on fire?”

“Yes,” Choir Boy said. “I saw him twice. Once the day before and once the day of.”

Sampson pressed him. “How long after the Audi was torched did Hawk appear?”

“I dunno. Like, ten or fifteen minutes?”

Enough time for Hawk to torch the car, go to the barricaded end, climb the ramp, and come down through the hole into high-troll town.

Sampson said, “So you left before the police came?”

“Hawk seemed to think it would be a good idea. I think it’s always a good idea to get away from bad stuff, so I did. I went out through the hole.”

When we asked where he’d gone, Campbell said he went to another squat in Northeast not far from the one where he claimed he’d seen my brother Charlie. He said he was the only person there.

“Like a private bunk?”

“Yup,” Choir Boy said. He seemed to have reached the end of his patience. “That’s where I would like to go now, since I’ve eaten and answered all your questions.”

“We haven’t quite finished yet, Mr. Campbell,” Sampson said. “Where were you on Saturday night?”

“There, the same place,” he said, sighing. “I holed up and had a good long drink so I would not have to look at myself.”

“You weren’t at the Avid Eyeball?” I asked. “The place near the homeless camp in the ravine?”

His gaze narrowed. “The strip joint? Nah. Why?”

I told him the news. Choir Boy took it badly. He hadn’t known, I realized. Whatever else Choir Boy was involved in, he wasn’t Corey McGovern’s killer.

He slumped down onto the bench, his elbow striking the keys. The organ let out a low moan that almost drowned out the sounds of Campbell’s grief. We let him sob genuine sobs until the worst of it was out of him.

He looked at us like we’d been through a battle together.

“I loved Corey, man. No matter how messed up things were with me, she was always kind. Always a friend. This is… this is so wrong. Why would someone shoot that poor girl? Why would someone set her on fire?”

Sampson said, “That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

After talking to Aldous Campbell a bit more, we convinced him to check into a detox center and promised that we would help him afterward. Sampson and I drove him to the center’s front door.

When he balked, I said, “You feel most alive, most free, when you’re singing, don’t you?”

Choir Boy thought about it and nodded. “When I sing, it’s like no one can touch me.”

“Then get sober and start singing for real,” Sampson said. “There’s your freedom, brother. Not at the bottom of a bottle.”

He still hesitated.

I said, “Go in there and show Friar Driscoll and that monk who hates you that you are not the person they think you are.”

Choir Boy set his jaw. Then he threw back his shoulders and marched inside. Sampson and I followed him in and told the staff that Campbell was a material witness in a homicide investigation.

Then we left him to withdraw from the booze and promised to help him when he was released.

OceanofPDF.com

62

ON THE SIDEWALK IN front of the detox center, I checked my watch. It was nearly seven p.m. The air was cooler with a sweet breeze.

Aldous Campbell had given us one important lead—we'd mentioned avgas, and he told us that Hawk worked a few hours a week fueling jets and planes at a private terminal at Dulles. We'd go check that out in the morning.

"I've gotta hustle, gotta get Willow some dinner," John Sampson said.

"Bring her by the house," I said. "My aunts have been cooking enough for an NFL team every night. And Nana's telling stories we've never heard before."

He thought about that and nodded. "Sounds good."

I went home and walked inside to hear music playing and squeals of laughter coming from farther within the house. After dropping my service weapon and credentials into the lockbox by the front door, I found my aunts in the living room trying to teach Ali and Damon how to swing dance.

"I'm following you," Aunt Connie Lou said to Ali, who seemed confused about his role.

Damon already got it. He looked at his little brother and said, "You're in charge. You lead the way with your hands."

I walked up behind Bree, who was watching with great delight. "Hey, you."

She turned around and grinned. "You missed the funniest stuff just now."

"Darn it," I said. "I could use a good laugh."

When the song ended, everyone—including Nana Mama and the night nurses—clapped and whistled.

"Another?" Nana Mama asked. "Ali get it."

Aunt Hattie said, "After dinner maybe. We've got roast pork loin, sweet potato fries, and spicy green beans coming up."

“John will be along soon with Willow,” I said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Connie said, going to the kitchen with Hattie. “Ten minutes!”

Bree and I spoke quietly to each other. “I had time to look at some other properties owned by Frost and Lear,” she told me. “There are a couple of them several blocks from the condemned building where the first body was found.”

My stomach sank a little as I thought about the story Choir Boy had told me. But I could not bear to tell Bree about my fears regarding my brother until I’d checked it out.

As I tamped down my concerns, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to Sampson and his daughter, Willow.

“Perfect timing, dinner is served!” Aunt Connie called.

“What’s for dessert?” Willow asked as soon as she’d greeted us all.

“Peach cobbler,” Aunt Hattie said, and the girl trotted happily toward the kitchen.

“She’d eat dessert first if I let her,” Sampson said, laughing.

“Wouldn’t we all?” I asked.

“The world might be a better place,” Bree said. “Well, maybe not.”

The aunts outdid themselves with a meal of pork loin roasted in mustard and wine sauce. Sampson declared it the best he’d ever had until Nana Mama said, “Had before. My recipe.”

Chagrined, he went to her side and said, “How could I not have known?”

My grandmother laughed. “Smooth, John.”

“Nope,” he said, grinning.

“You trip lot.”

“I remember.”

Across the room, Willow looked up from her peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream and said, “What’s that mean, Dad?”

Nana Mama gazed over at Sampson’s daughter, amused. “You want know?”

Willow, wide-eyed, nodded enthusiastically.

“Okay?” my grandmother asked Sampson.

“She’s gonna know sooner or later,” Sampson said. “She might as well hear it from you, Nana.”

OceanofPDF.com

63

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE who are natural-born storytellers no matter what they're going through. My grandmother was one of them.

Even after her stroke and head injury and despite the aphasia that left her speaking in sentence fragments in a soft, airy voice, Nana Mama was able to conjure up a different time—back when Sampson and I were boys.

John Sampson and I met when we were both nine years old, after I moved to DC with my brothers to live with Nana Mama.

He and I were both tall and liked to play basketball, and we soon became fast friends.

"We also took up shoplifting," I put in.

"What?" said the people in the room, including Nana Mama, who was staring at me.

"A couple of packs of cigarettes from Park's Corner Variety store," Sampson said. He looked at Ali and Willow and said emphatically, "I am not proud of it."

"You *smoked*?" Ali said.

"We sold them."

"From Park's too," my grandmother said. "Not know that. Other."

Bree looked from me to John and back again. "You shoplifted other things?"

"Not me," I said.

Nana went on. "Wobbly. Big baby horse. Arms, legs." I explained that Sampson had really shot up in height when we were in eighth grade.

"C'mon, Nana," Sampson said. "I still had game."

"Trip," my grandmother said. "Remember?"

My best friend grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, yeah."

Willow and everyone else in the room looked confused.

Nana said to me, "Tell."

I said, "By the time your dad was fifteen, Willow, he was six foot four. A

year later, he was six seven and still growing, but like everyone under the age of twenty-five, his prefrontal lobe was not yet fully formed. That's why he simply could not understand how stupid it was for someone his height to try to shoplift an NBA jersey."

Willow stared at her dad. "You stole a basketball jersey?"

"I tried," John said. "It was really dumb. Probably the dumbest thing I've ever done."

"I've seen you do a few things that are dumber." I chuckled. "Just kidding, Willow."

"No, he's not, baby doll," Sampson said.

When he was caught after the shoplifting incident, Sampson called our house from juvenile hall, since his mom was nowhere to be found, as usual. Basically, my friend had no one except us. He'd all but lived with us.

Willow looked at Sampson, who nodded. "That's sad."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It kind of was."

Nana went to see Sampson before his court appearance. She brought him my church clothes: gray pants, blue blazer, white collared shirt, and a tie.

"John bigger," Nana said. "Arms out. Ankles show."

"Height of fashion now," Sampson said, laughing. "Don't forget the sneakers."

"No. Big. No rope."

I frowned, trying to parse what she meant, then got it. "His shoes had no laces."

She smiled. "No. Trip."

Sampson said, "I tripped on my way up to see the judge and face-planted right there in juvie court."

My grandmother said, "Judge want throw book."

Willow was wide-eyed again. "The judge threw a book at you?"

"No, no, it just means he wasn't going to go easy on me."

"Oh, like that episode of *SpongeBob* where Judge Angry Jack was going to throw the book at SpongeBob."

"Same that day," Nana said. "What I… do?"

Sampson said, "Nana walked right over to me while I was on my knees trying to get up and started walloping me on the head with her purse and yelling that I was an idiot."

I knew the story, but my aunts did not, and they were horrified.

“How could that have helped the situation, Regina?” Aunt Hattie said.

“Didn’t the court officers stop you?” Aunt Connie said.

“They didn’t have a chance to interrupt the show,” Sampson said, grinning. “She grabbed me by the ear, hoisted me to my feet, and hauled me right up to the judge’s bench.”

Nana Mama had looked the judge in the eye, apologized for her outburst, and explained that she was the vice principal of a local school and that John would be living with our family from now on.

Sampson said, “And then she called me an idiot a few more times.”

“What did the judge do?” Ali asked.

“He loved it—the idiot stuff, the pulling me up by the ear, the whacking me with her purse. Judge Adams just ate it up.”

Willow started laughing. “That is so funny. You are so little, Nana, and you are holding Dad’s ear. The judge, he was afraid of you.”

My grandmother chuckled. “No.”

“No, Willow’s right,” Sampson said. “Judge Adams was convinced I’d have it tougher with Nana than I would in juvie.”

“Mmm,” Nana said, sobering.

Sampson said, his voice growing hoarse, “You saved me that day in court and every day afterward, Nana. I would not be the man I am without you.”

“Not true,” Nana said, wiping at tears in her eyes.

“It is true. Getting me through high school. Getting me into the army. Your constant friendship all these years.”

He went to her, kissed her cheek. “Nana, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

We were all choking up when the door opened and Jannie ran into the room, still in her Howard sweats, arms over her head, and everyone started to cheer the conquering hero of the Cross family.

OceanofPDF.com

64

I WOKE UP AT a quarter to six the following morning, crept out of bed, and went up to my attic office. I hadn't been there in a while.

Sitting at my desk, I chuckled at the memory of Jannie doing her victory dance around the room and ending it by hugging Nana Mama.

"Finals!" Nana had said. "I there."

Jannie looked at me. "Is that possible?"

"I would not rule anything out when it comes to your great-grandmother," I'd said. "If it's possible, she'll be there."

I wondered if it *was* possible. I supposed so, as long as she was stable and we were willing to pay for an air ambulance and the support to bring her. All it would take was money, and she had the money.

I set those concerns aside for the moment and dug through my drawers for an old address book. Funny how address books used to be so important and now they just gathered dust.

I turned to the *C*s and found a listing for *Cross, Charles* with a home phone and two cell numbers, one each for Charlie and his girlfriend, Ellen —now ex-girlfriend, I'd heard. I called the home phone first, but like when I'd tried his cell the other day, I got a message that the number was no longer in service. My stomach churned.

I wanted to call the cell phone carrier and find out when Charlie's phone had last pinged off a tower but knew that they wouldn't tell me unless I had a warrant.

That left Ellen's cell. Ellen was a registered nurse, and the last I'd heard, she was working in a hospital in Baltimore. Figuring nurses worked all kinds of shifts, I called despite the early hour.

It rang four times, then an automated message said that the mailbox was full.

Feeling like I wasn't getting far, I went online to see who was on call with the medical examiner's office. I was pleased to see that it was Janice

Taylor, a highly experienced forensic pathologist.

Dr. Taylor answered on the second ring. “Alex Cross. Long time.”

“Three weeks,” I said. “Janice, I need a favor.”

“Tell me.”

I asked her if she knew about the John Doe who’d been found, shot and burned, behind an abandoned apartment building in Northeast. Taylor knew all about it—she’d performed the autopsy.

“Was avgas the accelerant?” I asked.

“Affirmative. That report came back late yesterday afternoon.”

“Any signs of healed fractures?” I asked. When we were kids, Charlie had had a bad fall from a bicycle and broken his right wrist and left tibia.

“No way to tell. There were too many new fractures,” she said. “Probably the intensity of the fire causing the bones to crack and split.”

“What about DNA? I’m going to go to the lab later and have them take a cheek swab from me. Can you compare my DNA to the corpse’s?”

“Jesus, Alex,” she said. “Who do you think this John Doe is?”

“Could be my brother Charlie,” I said. “He’s—”

Another call came in. I looked at the ID. “Gotta go—his ex is calling.”

“Good luck and I hope the John Doe isn’t him,” Taylor said.

“Me too,” I said, and clicked over. “Hi, Ellen, it’s Alex Cross.”

There was a long pause before a voice that I barely recognized said, “What do you want, Alex?”

“I’m looking for Charlie.”

“I have no idea where you’d find him these days.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Three years ago,” Ellen said.

“Can I ask what happened?”

She sighed. “For Charlie, everything was a fight with the world, with reality. Everything that happened to him was an injustice, some curse on him. He lost a couple of good jobs because of that way of thinking, and he just started to spiral down, Alex. I don’t think me or you or anyone else could have stopped that.”

“He doesn’t contact you?”

“Blocked him about a year ago. He kept calling and asking for cash that he said he’d pay back but never did.”

“That’s tough.”

“I have to go, Alex. My shift starts in a half hour.”

“One more question, Ellen,” I said. “What was Charlie’s last known address?”

“Someplace in DC,” she said. “He never contacted you?”

“No.”

“Kind of sad.”

“It is.”

“What’s going on? Why are you trying to find him, Alex?”

I didn’t tell her my fears about the John Doe; instead, I told her about Nana Mama and said I wanted to give Charlie the chance to see her again.

“Oh,” she said, sounding relieved. “I’m sorry about your grandmother, Alex. I always liked her and I wish her only the best, but at first I thought you were calling to tell me Charlie was dead.”

OceanofPDF.com

65

BREE WENT TO HER office at the Bluestone Group early to finish up some reports. She had only just settled in front of her computer when she heard a quick rap on her door.

She looked up to find her boss, Elena Martin, standing there holding a cup of coffee. She wore a sharp beige suit and a stern expression.

She set the coffee in front of Bree. “Latte with cinnamon. Hope you like it.”

“Thank you, Elena.”

“My pleasure,” she said. “So. I hear you paid a visit to Frost and Lear.”

“I did,” Bree replied. “There’s something funky about them, and from what I understand, we have several clients interested in investing with them.”

“We do. But I cannot recollect a single client requesting that we look at them.”

Bree felt the heat come to her face. “Trying to be proactive.”

“Without being able to bill for your time and unique skills,” Martin said.

“I figured if I was right, the goodwill would pay off down the line.”

Her boss studied her with an arched eyebrow. “It has. In a roundabout way.” Martin took a chair. “Frost and Lear reached out to a potential investor to see if she had hired you and Bluestone to look into them. The investor—we’ll call her Rosalynn—said no. But what Rosalynn neglected to tell them was that she is an old and dear friend of mine,” Martin said. “She called me to give me fair warning.”

It turned out that Rosalynn had done her own due diligence when F and L approached her for funding a while back, and she had not liked what she’d found. Lear and Frost and several early investors were shielded from scrutiny by a baffling number of shell companies and offshore accounts, and the firm insisted on using anonymous cryptocurrency in many transactions.

“She felt it was some kind of sophisticated money-laundering scheme,” Martin said. “And she would know.”

“How so?” Bree said, taking a sip of her coffee.

Her boss squinted. “I have to be delicate about this.”

“You had me sign all sorts of nondisclosure forms when I was hired.”

“Even so.” Martin hesitated. “Rosalynn is absolutely law-abiding herself, legit self-made and all that, but she’s a second-generation member of an Eastern European family that has, shall we say, attracted sustained attention from law enforcement.”

“Russian organized crime.”

“Sophisticated OC. Never been successfully prosecuted. The point is that Rosalynn did her due diligence on Frost and Lear and decided they smelled a little too familiar.”

Bree said, “It takes one to know one.”

Martin’s brows knit. “Rosalynn is not part of her extended family’s activities in any way. But, yes, point taken.”

After thinking about all this for several moments, Bree said, “How much money did Rosalynn think might eventually flow into the various F and L projects?”

“Could be hundreds of millions,” Martin said.

“Lot of motive there to get rid of people who might stand in the way.”

Bree described the homeless encampment and the recent murders, including the body discovered under the Bridge to Nowhere.

“The Firebug,” Martin said, using the nickname the press had given the killer. “I know that place. People call it a ghost ramp because of the way it just sits there crumbling by the river.”

“That’s it,” Bree said, then told her Frost and Lear had bought up almost all the property surrounding it.

Her boss said, “Sounds smart until you think that Rosalynn might be right, and a ridiculous amount of dirty money is going to vanish into whatever they build there and then come out clean on the other side.”

“Enough to justify a murder or two,” Bree said.

Elena Martin nodded. “Exactly what Rosalynn thought.”

OceanofPDF.com

66

IN OUR SQUAD CAR that morning, after I ran to the lab for a quick cheek swab, Sampson glanced over at me as he drove.

“What did you tell Ellen when she said she thought you’d called to say your brother was dead?” he asked.

“Dodged it,” I said. “Told her about Nana Mama, then added that I’d heard Charlie was homeless and I wanted to find him, see if I could help. She said I couldn’t, that Charlie was like a lot of men of a certain age—sure that all their chances had passed them by, bitter, lonely.”

“Kind of cynical,” Sampson said.

“With Charlie, she’s probably right,” I said, and sighed.

“You think it’s him, the first guy shot and burned?”

“That’s one of my worst nightmares, John. I don’t even know how to tell Nana and my father that Charlie might be on the streets.”

We were on our way to a private jet terminal, an FBO—fixed-base operator—at Dulles International Airport, about a forty-minute ride from the Bridge to Nowhere. Dulles had two of these FBOs to handle all the business and personal jets that landed there. Verified Air Services was the newer one and farther south from the commercial terminals. Sampson pulled up to the security gate and held up his credentials, and we were waved over to a large lot with half a dozen black Suburbans parked by the entrance. We went into a very sleek office with a high glass wall looking out over the FBO’s apron.

A couple in their fifties stood in front of a counter. Two black Labrador retrievers sat next to them.

“Your pilot will be right along, Mr. and Mrs. Cloud,” said the cheery woman behind the counter. “Your Caravan is being fueled, and you’ll be on your way back to Hilton Head before you know it.”

“The pilot should have been here by now,” the woman said brusquely. “We chartered for exactly noon, and it’s ten past. I mean, we’re ready, aren’t

we, Phineas? And Mr. Biggs and Robby-Boy are ready."

"Ready and wasting time, Daphne, but so be it," Phineas said, and the two of them walked away. The dogs followed them, wagging their tails.

The counter lady kept her smile intact as she looked at us. Her name tag read NANCY BRINKER.

"Hi, Nancy," I said, showing her my badge.

The smile disappeared. She looked over at the couple, who were getting coffee from a fancy machine, and said softly, "What can I do for you, Detectives?"

Sampson took the hint and lowered his voice. "We were told that a guy named Alejandro Rodriguez works here." He showed her a photo on his phone.

"Oh, Hawk? Yeah, he works here off and on," she said. "He's here today."

"What job does he do?" I asked.

"Pumping fuel," she said, and lowered her voice even more. "Thank God that's all he does for us, because I'd swear the guy's on drugs half the time. But he somehow passes all the tests."

That was more information than I'd expected.

Sampson said, "You keep fuel logs?"

Nancy nodded. "Of course. Coming and going."

"Any avgas missing?"

Her brows knit. "I wouldn't know about that. Gerard Daily, the manager, he tracks that kind of stuff. But he won't be back until two."

Sampson said, "Mind if we have a chat with Hawk while we wait for him?"

She shrugged and gestured to a door. "He's running the fuel truck on the tarmac. Go through there and out the far side of the hangar."

We followed her directions. The hangar was cavernous and echoed with the sounds of mechanics working on a pair of Gulfstream jets. No one looked twice at us as we walked behind the jets and out the wide-open hangar doors.

To our left were several personal aircraft lined up in rows, many with shades drawn and cockpit windows covered. To our right sat a navy-blue Cessna 208 Caravan with the door open and the stairway down.

Parked next to the plane was a Ford F-450 with a big jet-fuel tank on the rear chassis and a second fuel tank marked AVGAS on a trailer. They were about forty yards away, and orange cones were set on the tarmac along with a sign that said STAY BACK. NO SMOKING. FUELING IN PROGRESS.

Up on the frame of the avgas tank, holding the fuel line connected to the Caravan's fuel port, was Hawk. He was identifiable even with his back to us and wearing a green Verified Air Services workman's suit, safety helmet, safety glasses, and a set of protective earmuffs.

We stopped at the warning sign, putting us about thirty yards from Rodriguez.

"Hey, Hawk!" Sampson yelled. For a moment it looked like the roar from commercial jets taking off and the earmuffs had prevented him from hearing.

But then he glanced over his shoulder and saw us. The former Special Forces operator showed no surprise, just gave us a quick wave with his free hand.

Rodriguez checked the fuel handle, then jumped off the tanker trailer and landed between us and the plane. He crouched and did something we could not see, then came around the back of the trailer as if he was going to approach us.

Instead he went to the rear of the pickup and, with his back to us, bent over the mechanism that held the trailer to the truck's towing ball.

"What's he doing?" Sampson asked.

"I don't know, but I think there's fuel dribbling out the other side of that tank," I replied. "Hawk!"

Giving no indication he'd heard, Rodriguez climbed into the Ford, started it, and ducked down for a moment. When he popped back up, he had something in his mouth. He threw the truck in gear and hit the accelerator.

The tanker trailer lurched forward after the truck with a loud clank, swayed, then sped up. More fuel dribbled out the far side.

Then the fuel line stretched and tore free of the tank. The hose dangled from the Caravan, gushing avgas onto the tarmac.

Hawk looked right at us as he went by, grinning, then swung the fueling truck hard to his right, slinging the tanker trailer behind him our way.

I saw clearly what was in his mouth.

“He’s got a lit cigarette, John! Run!”

OceanofPDF.com

67

SAMPSON AND I SPUN around and sprinted toward the hangar, taking quick looks over our shoulders. Hawk had the pickup zigzagging away from us, the tanker trailer swinging wildly behind him.

We reached the hangar door just as the trailer's linkage broke free of the tow ball and flew sideways toward the parked jets. The front end gouged into the tarmac, stopping it about a hundred yards from us, fuel trickling out from a bleeder port.

Hawk hit the brakes, threw the F-450 into reverse, and came back at the hangar.

Sampson ran into the building, bellowing at the mechanics inside, "Take cover! Call 911! Call for fire trucks!"

The former Special Forces operator skidded his truck to a halt halfway between the tanker trailer and the Caravan, some five feet from the avgas gushing onto the ground, revved the Ford's engine so high that the vehicle shuddered, then released the brake and peeled away, heading toward the main runways.

As he did, he flipped his lit cigarette out the window.

The cigarette hit the fuel, which erupted in blues and greens with the sound of wind. The flames raced in two directions, and I knew what was about to happen as I dove for cover behind stacks of boxes and tires in the hangar.

Air traffic controllers in the Dulles towers later said the flames reached the tanker first, and it went off like a heavy bomb. Pieces of shrapnel from the tank hit everything around, including the stacks of boxes and tires, which tumbled down on me a second before the fire reached the hose dangling from the Caravan.

The flames evidently stalled there a second, then found a fresh puddle of avgas and shimmied up the hose to the handle and the plane's open fuel tank. The explosion shook the building, tore holes in the aluminum walls,

blew out windows on the far right, and vaporized the back half of the Caravan.

I felt that eruption like a punch to the head.

The stench of spent fuel was everywhere. I got woozy for a moment before Sampson pulled the boxes and tires off me. He was bleeding from a gash on the side of his head and another on his right arm.

I was dizzy. My ears were ringing, but I could hear sirens in the distance.

“You okay?” Sampson shouted.

“I think so, but I got my bell rung,” I said, hearing my own voice as if I were underwater.

He helped me up. I gazed dumbly around, shocked at the destruction.

The jets inside the hangar were pocked with holes and cuts. Two of the mechanics were lying wounded on the ground with their coworkers helping them.

I was still somewhat out of it as we walked from the hangar. The Caravan was still on fire, belching foul gray smoke that hung in the air like opaque curtains. With its entire tail section missing, the forward fuselage scorched, and the nose angled upward, the aircraft looked like a crippled black crane. Or so it seemed to me in my addled state.

Many of the planes and jets closest to the tanker had pieces of their tails missing or their windshields damaged. Two were burning. I heard more sirens in the distance and turned to see that the windows of the airport’s office had been blown out.

I could see the Clouds, the couple from Hilton Head who had been waiting on the Caravan, standing inside looking dumbstruck and streaked with blood from facial lacerations.

It was only then that I remembered who had caused the destruction.

“Where’s Rodriguez?” I shouted at Sampson, who was also looking a little wobbly now. “Where did he go?”

Sampson shook his head, peering out through that caustic smoke. The desk clerk, Nancy Brinker, came running out to us, holding a walkie-talkie. She seemed okay but had several cuts on her face and ears. She gestured with the radio toward the thickest smoke.

“The tower says Hawk’s out on one of the taxiways. We can’t see him from here because of the smoke, but he’s up on top of the tanker doing

some kind of dance.”

That snapped us both back to reality. Sampson grabbed the two-way at his hip and turned it on before we drew our weapons.

He called dispatch, told them we were on the scene of the explosions at Dulles and were closing in on the suspect. Then we held our breath and ran through the smoke, skirting the blast sites and coming out of the haze to see the fuel truck parked in the taxiway about a hundred yards from us.

The scene reminded me of what Hawk had looked like on top of the ghost ramp a few days before: All but obscured by the caustic fog hanging over the area, he was spinning slowly on top of the tanker, his head rocked back, arms and palms raised to a sky that the smoke had turned sullen and angry.

OceanofPDF.com

68

SIRENS WAILING, FIRE TRUCKS and police cars raced toward the FBO from all directions as John Sampson and I moved fast to the fuel truck and Hawk doing his dance.

“We have Rodriguez in sight,” Sampson called to dispatch. “Suspect appears unarmed but tell the backup coming that he is ex–Special Forces.”

“Roger that,” the dispatcher said, and we heard her repeat the warning before Sampson turned the volume down.

A police helicopter appeared high above us. A news chopper followed.

We were within fifty yards of Hawk by then. I heard a strange whistling noise over the rippling sirens and the chug of the helicopters. Rodriguez had a tiny whistle between his lips and was toot-tooting on it as he danced and spun.

“Alejandro Rodriguez!” Sampson roared when we were thirty yards away, both of us with weapons aimed at him.

He seemed oblivious to us and the sirens.

“Hawk!” I yelled. “Down on the ground!”

Rodriguez kept on dancing, so I did the only thing I could think of. I pulled out the small Taser the department had us carry, walked closer, and shot him with it.

The device hit him square in the chest and blew him off the tanker. He hit the tarmac hard, then rolled over onto his knees making violent choking noises, and I realized he’d inhaled the whistle.

Sampson and I both ran to him. I got there first, grabbed him from behind, and performed the Heimlich maneuver. The little whistle popped free, and Hawk gasped for air as we got cuffs on him.

“Suspect in custody,” Sampson said into his radio as I yanked Hawk to his feet.

“What suspect?” Rodriguez slurred in an amused voice. “Li’l ol’ me?”

He broke into gales of laughter and I saw that his eyes were watery red

saucers with widely dilated pupils. His breath stank.

“You’re under arrest, Mr. Rodriguez,” I said, and gave him his Miranda warnings, which he found hysterical. “Do you understand your rights?”

“Nope,” he said and giggled. “I’m not understanding jack right now. Total separation from ego.”

“You ate shrooms before work, Hawk?” I said. “Really?”

He chortled. “Maybe a little too much. Hit the whole quarter ounce before punching the time clock. Whoa, man, look at your face. It’s, like, melting. Ha-ha. Melting!”

The ex–Special Forces operator said this last bit like he was imitating the Wicked Witch of the West, then tossed back his head and guffawed, tears streaming down his face.

Sampson had had enough. He grabbed Rodriguez roughly by one elbow, I took him by the other, and we hustled him away.

A fire truck raced past us. Then another.

“Hey, man,” Hawk said, sounding bewildered. “What’s with the smoke and the sirens and the firefighters? The rad colors? So psychedelic. Where’s this coming from?”

“It came from you, jackass,” Sampson growled. “You know exactly what you did.”

“What’d I do?” he asked, looking at me with a befuddled expression.

“Let me see,” I said. “In addition to shooting and then burning four people with avgas over the past few weeks, today you blew up a fuel tanker, destroyed a plane that’s worth millions, damaged a dozen others, and almost killed several people, including us.”

He started laughing again. “Nah, nah, nah,” Hawk said in a singsong voice. “That wasn’t real, man. That was just a hallucination I had. I’m still having it!”

We reached the smoke, which was thicker because firefighters were already hosing down the Caravan and the other planes. John and I covered our mouths, but we let Hawk breathe the foul haze and choke on it.

“Black Hawk down, man.” Rodriguez coughed as we emerged from the smoke. He gazed around with those watery eyes at the sheer scope of the mayhem he’d caused. “We crashed, right? Black Hawk down?”

He looked at each of us in turn, then his eyes fluttered wildly and rolled up into his head, and he sagged in our arms.

OceanofPDF.com

69

BREE WALKED THROUGH THE door of Frost and Lear's offices in Bethesda once again. She smiled winningly at the young receptionist, a freckle-faced redhead who wore thick eyeglasses and a harried expression.

"Bree Stone with the Bluestone Group," she said pleasantly, handing the young woman a card. "Is Jeffrey Frost available?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Frost is on-site at one of our developments in the area."

"Which one?" Bree asked. "The empty lots by the Anacostia River or the condemned building in Northeast?"

"Uh, Northeast, I think."

"Great, I'll find him there," she said, and left with a wave.

Alex called shortly after Bree started driving. He told her not to worry but that he and John had been in a wild incident at one of the private airfields at Dulles. Bree was shocked to hear about the explosions and Hawk's drugged state.

"But you're not hurt?" she said.

"Miraculously, no. How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, then filled him in on her talk with Elena Martin and told him her current destination, the condemned building in Northeast DC by the vacant lot where the first burn victim had been found.

"Bree, I have to tell you something about my brother Charlie," Alex said. He told her that Aldous Campbell said his brother had been living in that building, and Alex was afraid that Charlie was the earlier burn victim.

"What do you hope to do by going to that building?" he asked her.

"Shake Frost up a little?"

"Let me know what rattles," Alex said. "And be careful. If Rosalynn's right about Frost and Lear being involved in organized crime, you don't know what you might be facing."

"Heard and understood."

"Okay, gotta go make my report to Chief Kane."

“I don’t miss those days at all,” Bree said and hung up.

It took her twenty minutes to drive to the condemned apartment building that F and L owned, the one where Campbell said he’d last seen Charlie Cross. The building had a chain-link fence around it and a weed-choked vacant lot behind it.

Though the gate bore a No Trespassing sign, the padlock was open, and the chain dangled. She went through to the entrance to the building.

When she opened the door, she was almost overwhelmed by the smell of rodent urine. Bree hesitated. She hated mice and rats. She really did not want to go inside.

But then she heard muted voices echoing in the halls and forced herself to enter. She stopped, listened, and heard the voices again. They were coming from somewhere above her.

Bree found a groaning, squeaky staircase and climbed it to the second floor, feeling more uneasy about the strength of the structure the higher she got. The voices were coming from a room down the hall, and there seemed to be three, two male and one female.

She walked toward the voices, and the garbled sounds became clearer.

“This is the decision, then,” a voice she recognized as Jeffrey Frost’s said. “We either start over with a new design or we take the entire place down to the studs and rehab it the way we envisioned.”

“Just asking,” a woman with a slight Eastern European accent said, “but which one requires more cash? Starting over or rehabbing with the existing steel structure?”

“In all likelihood, rehab,” Frost replied. “Lots of subs. Lots of details.”

“Wiggle room on costs versus real costs?”

“Bigger wiggle with rehab. Like I said, lots of subs.”

A male with a nasal voice and a thicker Eastern European accent said, “When can you—”

Bree stepped through the doorway, smiling brightly. “Hi there, everyone!”

OceanofPDF.com

70

JOHN SAMPSON LEFT THE airport in the back of an ambulance with an incoherent Alejandro Rodriguez handcuffed to a gurney. I got out of the fire department's way, called Willard Kane, and told him everything that had transpired so far that day.

"You're all over the news," Kane told me. "There's video of you shooting the dancing guy with the Taser after Sampson called into dispatch and said he was unarmed."

"He said he *appeared* unarmed, but Rodriguez is an ex–Special Forces operator," I said firmly. "We could not see if he had a weapon hidden, sir. My best judgment, given the destruction and injury he had just caused, was that we should incapacitate him as quickly and humanely as possible."

The chief paused, then said, "I would have done the same thing, Cross. Do we have a motive for blowing up a plane? And how the hell did he get clearance for a job like pumping airplane fuel at Dulles?"

"All questions to be answered, sir. But he apparently ingested a very large amount of psilocybin mushrooms before he showed up for work this morning."

"Was he in his right mind?" Kane asked, sounding disgusted. "He won't be able to claim insanity, will he?"

"He was hardly in his right mind, but I've never heard of a too-many-shrooms defense."

"Make them run the hallucinogen tox screens in addition to the regular ones so we know what drugs were in his system. Did something trigger him?"

"I'm assuming it was us showing up at his work after he'd run from the homeless camp after lying to us about his whereabouts when the Audi was torched."

Kane said, "You think he's good for all four killings?"

"Things are sure leaning that way," I said.

“What do you need in order to nail him cold?”

“We’re going to start with the avgas logs,” I said. “If we can find evidence of fuel going missing before the first murder and during times that Rodriguez was present, I think we’ve got him. Especially if we can find video of him leaving the grounds with fuel cans.”

“Keep me posted,” Kane said. “And I’m glad you’re both alive.”

“Thank you. We are as well, Chief,” I said and hung up.

I spent the next three hours with detectives from the Loudon County sheriff’s department and investigators from the FBI, the FAA, and the ATF, all of whom descended on the scene quickly.

I was pleased to see FBI agent Ned Mahoney. The senior crisis manager and I went way back—he and I were partners when I worked for the Bureau. Mahoney listened closely to my account while his agents gathered security footage from the airport’s multiple cameras. The video corroborated everything in my version of the narrative, from Hawk’s unconcerned reaction to our arrival to the opening of the bleeder valve on the avgas tank to the disengagement of the trailer linkage.

“It’s a miracle someone didn’t die,” Mahoney said, shaking his head after taking in the damage to the aircraft and the hangar.

“So far, the worst injury I heard about is a mechanic who took a piece of shrapnel to the thigh that cut his femoral artery. But the medics got to him quickly, and they’re saying he’s going to be okay.”

“Like I said, a miracle,” Mahoney replied. “You know we’re going to take over this part of your investigation.”

“Have at it,” I said. “As long as we are still lead on the murders.”

“Yep, those are still your cases,” he said. “But keep me informed, Alex. The connection between the motive for what happened here and those murders seems pretty clear. He saw you and John, realized you had him because of the jet fuel, and tried to go out in a blaze of drug-fueled glory.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too. But we’ll see what he tells Sampson at the hospital.”

“You on your way there?”

“Unless you need more from me right now.”

“I’ll need a formal statement eventually but not today. How’s the family?”

I got him caught up on what was going on with Nana Mama, ending on

a positive note. “Language is not there yet, but she’s getting a little better every day,” I said.

“That little old lady is beyond tough.”

“She is that.”

OceanofPDF.com

71

JEFFREY FROST GAVE BREE a vicious look when he saw her standing there in the hall of the condemned building. “You are trespassing, Ms. Stone,” he said.

“I went to your office and was told to come here,” Bree said breezily. She entered the room and walked with confidence to the developer and the other two people.

Frost and the woman both wore yellow hard hats and blue coveralls. The woman was in her late thirties, gorgeous, with long silver-blond hair that cascaded out from under her hard hat and flowed over the shoulders of her coverall. If she was a borzoi, her companion was a bulldog—he was built like an NFL linebacker, had no neck, a bulging forehead, and flattened facial features. He wore black jeans, combat-style black boots, and a gray hoodie, no protective hat or goggles.

Fighter, Bree thought when she noticed his cauliflower ears. *MMA?*

She extended her hand to the woman and said, “Bree Stone. I work for the Bluestone Group. We do security and due diligence for various clients.”

The woman regarded her icily, swallowed, then took her hand and shook it limply. “Tatiana Volt. This is my associate Egon Bijan. We are helping to finance this project. Who are you doing work for? Which investor?”

“I honestly don’t know, and I couldn’t say if I did,” Bree said, meeting her gaze.

“What are your questions?” Bijan said, watching her impassively.

“No questions. I just wanted to look at the vacant lot in back where the homeless man was shot and set on fire.”

Bijan opened his mouth but Volt spoke before he could say a word. “A horrible thing. Why are you interested?”

“Because a similar incident was brought to our attention, another body found shot and burned, this one under a so-called ghost ramp that is surrounded by land F and L also owns.”

The financier’s brows knit, and she shot a worried glance at Frost. “True?”

“Evidently, Tatiana. But we had zero to do with it,” the developer said.

“Who were these victims?” Bijan asked him.

“I don’t know,” Frost said dismissively. “The one here was some homeless guy. Unidentified, I believe. The other one too, I suppose. There’s a homeless camp there as well.”

“Not entirely correct,” Bree said. “The second victim was Dylan Sentinel, a former minister. He was shot in an Audi, after which he and his car were set on fire with aviation gas.”

“What?” Volt said, now glaring at Frost. “You’ve told us nothing about this.”

“Because we had nothing to do with it, Tatiana,” the developer insisted, his palms raised. “This is a homeless problem, not an F and L problem. The only thing we can be accused of is trying to make things better.”

“Show us where it happened here,” she said.

Frost sighed, then led them down a long hall and into a room where the smell of excrement was strong. There was trash everywhere. “Down there,” Frost said, pointing through the frame of a glassless window.

Bree stepped up beside Volt and looked down at the scorched area in the weeds, wondering with a sick feeling if that had been Charlie Cross aflame.

Volt said, “I do not like these things.” She looked at her partner. “Egon, until we know more, we must reconsider.”

Frost said, “Tatiana, we had—”

“I’ve heard this before from you,” she snapped.

“Agreed,” Bijan said.

“Wait, what?” Frost cried. “Guys. No. Honestly, this is just a blip.”

“Two dead in this manner is no blip,” Volt said, patting an agitated Frost on the shoulder. “We will call you in a few days once we have digested this, Jeffrey. We’ll show ourselves out.”

“I’ll follow you,” Bree said. “Thank you, Mr. Frost.”

“Anything for an anonymous investor,” the developer said with venom in his voice.

Outside the condemned building, Bijan said, “Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Ms. Stone.”

“You would have figured it out eventually,” Bree said, pulling a business

card from her purse. She handed it to Volt. “Can I get your contact information?”

Volt hesitated, then went to her purse and brought out a simple off-white card with her name, email address, and phone number embossed on it in gold lettering.

“No company name?”

“We are a family office,” Volt said, and almost smiled.

Bree pointed to her sedan. “This is me.”

“And we are just there,” Bijan said, gesturing toward a Mercedes-Benz G-Wagon parked across the street.

“Goodbye, Ms. Stone,” Volt said, and they crossed to their car.

Bree got in her car, memorized their Delaware license plate, and drove off.

OceanofPDF.com

72

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the road, Egon Bijan climbed into the driver's seat of the Benz, shut the door, and looked at Tatiana Volt, who was openly furious with him.

"Go ahead, get it off your chest," he said in Russian. "You know you want to."

She exploded, shrieking, "I told you that it was going too far! I told you, and now we are drawing attention!"

Bijan roared back at her, "How the hell was I supposed to know it would inspire copycats?"

OceanofPDF.com

73

I FOUND JOHN SAMPSON sitting with Nina Hanson, a Loudon County sheriff's detective, outside Alejandro Rodriguez's room in the overwhelmed emergency unit at Inova Fair Oaks Hospital near Chantilly, Virginia, the closest medical facility to the private airfield at Dulles.

The couple from Hilton Head were there too, as were the wounded mechanics and Nancy Brinker. The Clouds' dogs had miraculously survived unscathed.

My partner's head and upper arm lacerations had required stitches. Detective Hanson told me that Sampson had refused to leave Hawk's bedside, so the doctor sewed John up at the foot of Rodriguez's bed while the ex–Special Forces operator was treated with sedatives and IV fluids.

"You and I are not going to be able to hold him," I told Sampson outside Hawk's room.

"What? Why not? We busted him."

"The FBI's involved because of the airport, but don't worry, Mahoney caught the case, and he knows we think Hawk is good for four murders."

"Federal custody, then?" Detective Hanson asked.

I nodded. "They'll probably take him to Alexandria."

Sampson scowled. "Not before we—"

A harried doctor came out of Hawk's room, shut the door, and looked at us. "He had a gorilla's dose of psilocybin in him. It's a wonder his brain didn't drain out his ears."

I said, "You'll get us hard numbers on what was in his system?"

"They're still in the lab, but yes."

"He alert?" Sampson asked.

"Coming around," she said. Her name, Allegra Le, was stitched on her white coat.

"Dr. Le, I read him his Miranda rights at the airport," I said. "Would he have understood them?"

She pursed her lips. “I’m not the one to make that call, but, wow, did he have a lot of mushrooms in him. I doubt he understood anything.”

“Could he understand now?”

“Possibly.”

“Let’s go, then,” Sampson said, and we entered the room. Hawk was propped up in bed, eyes closed, IV running into his left arm, his right wrist cuffed to the bed rail.

Sampson went to his side, holding his phone in his good hand, the camera on and recording. “Mr. Rodriguez?”

Hawk’s eyes opened lazily; he found me and Sampson, then Detective Hanson.

“What’s up, buttercup?” he said and winked at her.

“Mr. Rodriguez, do you know where you are?” I asked.

He looked around. “I’d say hospital.”

“Where were you before this?”

He thought about that. “Part-time gig at the airport. Trying to make enough to get off the streets, you know.”

I read him his Miranda rights. “Do you understand these rights, Mr. Rodriguez?”

Hawk nodded.

Sampson said, “Do you know why you’re in the hospital?”

He thought about it. “Overdose?”

I said, “You blew up a fuel tanker and a plane and lit another half a dozen aircraft on fire. Most of the people you wounded are in the rooms all around you.”

Hawk blinked, shook his head a little, stared into the middle distance.

“Nah, that… nah, that can’t be real. Just some crazy, twisted shit the shrooms kicked off in my head.”

“No, it’s real,” Sampson said. “We were eyewitnesses.”

I said, “And we know you killed four people, including Corey McGovern. We were coming to arrest you when you went berserk.”

The ex–Special Forces operator blinked and stared into the distance again. He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. Not Corey. She…” Rodriguez refocused on me. “If this is true, I need to speak to a lawyer. I exercise my right to remain silent.”

OceanofPDF.com

74

IT WAS A LITTLE past seven that evening when I climbed the stairs to my front porch, feeling more wrung out than I had in years. I went inside and immediately noticed things were quiet. A little too quiet.

Nana.

I quickly put my service weapon away in the lockbox in the closet and went toward the kitchen and the great room. Bree met me before I could enter.

She whispered, “Nana’s sleeping now. Damon took Ali and the aunts out to dinner so things could stay quiet. Today was evidently an up-and-down day. I’ll let the night nurse explain.”

One of the night nurses, Bobby Jain, came into the kitchen with my grandmother’s chart. He said she had done an excellent job with her physical and occupational therapy sessions that morning. My grandmother got out of bed and with the walker had been able to slowly make it to the powder room off the living room.

“That’s great,” Bree whispered.

“It is,” the night nurse whispered back. “And she did well during her speech therapy. That was around one o’clock, and she took a short nap afterward. But when she woke up around three, she was confused, and she panicked. Her heart rate went way up until your aunts calmed her down.”

“And now?”

“Right back to chugging along.”

“And her language?”

“Better, but still broken. ‘Telegraphic,’ as the therapist calls it.”

“Did she eat?”

“She had dinner about an hour ago and then went back to sleep. But she gave us orders to wake her up for a rerun of *The Wire* at eight.”

“She loves that show,” I said. “I think she’s seen every episode twice.”

“Then we’ll make sure she gets up for it,” Bobby said with a smile. He

went back into the great room where the other nurse, Juanita Jones, was recording Nana's vitals.

"Do we have leftovers?" I asked Bree.

"Enough for a high-school football team," Bree said. "I'll get you a plate and meet you in your office where we can talk normally. I want to hear more about the airport."

I went up to our bedroom and changed into sweatpants and a hoodie. When I opened the door, Bree was coming up the stairs with a plate of chicken, salad, and pasta with pesto and two cold beers.

We climbed together to my attic office and cleared off the desk. I tore into the meal, which was incredible, even reheated. Between bites I described my day from the time John Sampson and I arrived at the airfield to Ned Mahoney's men taking custody of Hawk around six thirty that evening.

"He's claiming he was so high on mushrooms, he doesn't remember blowing up a fuel tank and a plane and almost killing a dozen people?" Bree asked incredulously.

"Exactly," I said. "Have fun explaining that to a jury."

"Can you place him at the scene of any of the murders?"

"Not yet. But we will. And you? How'd your day go?"

Bree told me a little more about her conversation with her boss.

"And this Rosalynn thinks the developments are fronts for money laundering?" I asked.

"Among other things," Bree said. "Those projects are certainly going to be huge sinkholes for cash for a long time. We know numbers can be monkeyed with. And they have already attracted wealthy investors with Russian accents."

She described meeting Tatiana Volt and Egon Bijan with Jeffrey Frost at the condemned building near where the first body was discovered. I flashed again on the idea that it might have been my brother and felt shaken for a moment.

"So Rosalynn was right about Russian organized crime?" I said finally.

Bree shrugged. "They claim to represent a family business with an address in Wilmington, Delaware. They have no presence on social media, and I've found only one reference to Tatiana, two years ago as part of a group rehabbing a building in Philadelphia. Any chance you could run

them?”

“I’ll do better,” I said. “I’ll have Ned run them. But honestly? Whatever Frost and Lear and these two are up to feels separate from the murders. I think Hawk’s our man as far as the killings are concerned.”

“I don’t know. There’s something off about them, Alex. I can feel it.”

“And I trust your instincts. I’ll send a note to Ned to run Frost, Lear, Bijan, and Volt before I crash tonight.”

OceanofPDF.com

75

MY PHONE STARTED BUZZING on my nightstand at five minutes to six Thursday morning. John Sampson.

I slid out of bed, took the phone into the bathroom, and shut the door. "John."

"I woke up to a voicemail from Boog. He called me about forty-five minutes ago. Kid was hysterical with fear."

"What did he say?"

"He said, quote: 'It's happened again. Below the bridge. I'm getting the kids out of here before they see—oh God, no!' And then he hung up. And someone called in a dead body under the ghost ramp. They've got Winthrop and Hayes responding."

Another body. "You have someone to take care of Willow?"

"Not until school starts at eight," he said.

"Bring her here," I said. "Bree or Damon can take her to school."

"See you in twenty," Sampson said.

I took a fast shower and woke Bree with the news before dressing. The nurses said Nana had had a good night and was resting peacefully, for which I was grateful. After grabbing a go-cup of coffee, I went out onto the front porch.

It was warm already and the trees up and down my street were in full greenery, leaves rustling in the breeze. The sweet scent of flowers blooming hung in the air.

I closed my eyes for a second, breathing them in, thinking about how unfair and incongruous it was that I could be experiencing beauty at the same time as some new trauma was unfolding beneath the ghost ramp.

I heard Sampson's car pull up. He jumped out and got Willow and her school bag from the back seat. Bree appeared at the door behind me.

"We've got to move," Sampson said as Willow sleepwalked by me to the house.

“I’ll drive,” I said and got behind the wheel of Sampson’s car while he rode shotgun, our usual roles reversed. We heard sirens heading toward the Bridge to Nowhere.

We got there at ten minutes to seven. Two empty patrol cars were already in the alley behind the lumberyard when we pulled up and got out. We headed through the brush to the bridge and the homeless encampment.

The closer we got, the more we could see of the high trolls’ world. Lainey Locket was on a girder high up on the north embankment, watching us. No one was up on what used to be Hawk’s aerie. *Where is Sean Brundage?*

A disheveled woman pushed a cart piled with her things toward us.

“You looking for the body?” she asked.

“We are,” I said.

“Other side of the ramp,” she said. “Closer to the river.”

“You the one who called it in?” Sampson asked.

“Hell no, some kid did,” she said. “But this is the second dead body in a week. Time for this old gal to move on.”

We stood aside to let her pass, then hurried on, feeling, as we had on every visit, that eyes were trained on us. We walked into the dark shadows of the ghost ramp, past where the Audi and Reverend Sentinel had burned. A female patrol officer met us on the other side.

“Unidentified female back there in the thick stuff close to the river,” she said, pointing to the south. “They’re taping it off for you.”

We thanked her and went over to where three officers were stringing yellow tape around saplings growing in a tangle of brush about sixty yards from the east bank of the Anacostia.

“Where is she?” Sampson asked.

“About ten feet ahead and to my one o’clock,” one of the officers replied, gesturing. “She’s got no purse and she has no identification on her.”

“Did you move the body?” I asked.

“No, sir!” he said emphatically. “Just checked pockets with my gloves on.”

Sampson said, “You talk to who found her?”

The officer shook his head. “Anonymous call. We had to look for her when we got here.”

“Cross!”

I turned to see Detectives Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes coming toward us.

“We were called on this,” Hayes said. “This is our case.”

“Well, we live close by,” Sampson said.

“We want to see the body in situ,” Winthrop said.

“So do we,” I said.

Sampson and I put on blue booties and gloves and ducked under the tape. Hayes and Winthrop followed us.

The brush was thorny and grabbed at us. We pushed forward until we could see the victim. She was on her knees, turned away from us, pants and panties down around her shins, a roll of toilet paper at her side. Her shoulders and head were stuck in a thick bush growing there. There was a significant dent at the back of her skull. Her hair was soaked with blood.

“Blunt-force trauma as she relieved herself,” Winthrop said. “Heavy pipe, maybe.”

“Could be,” I said, moving brush aside so I could go around in front of her.

I had to duck to look through the bushes she’d fallen into, but I saw enough of her face to recognize her, and my heart sank. “Jesus.”

“What?” Sampson said.

“It’s Anna Bananas.”

OceanofPDF.com

76

TOMMY HAYES RADIOED FOR a forensics team while Judy Winthrop and John Sampson searched the area around the body. I went looking for Emma and Luke Stein, Anna's kids, and Robert Bogner. As I climbed the north embankment toward their squats, several people watched me.

"Are we safe?" one older woman asked.

"No," I said. "Be on your guard and call the police if you see anything."

"I don't have a phone."

"Borrow one if you see something," I said and moved upward.

When I reached the lean-to where Anna Stein had lived with her kids, I knocked on a piece of plywood. No answer.

I pulled back a tarp and looked inside. I was surprised to see how clean and well organized the shelter was: Crates were lined up on one wall with folded clothes inside them. Three sleeping bags were laid out on wooden pallets with foam pads. A propane lantern hung above a single-burner camping stove, and schoolbooks were neatly stacked on a makeshift desk.

Thinking of Luke and Emma waiting in line for the meal at St. Anthony's the other day, I had to close my eyes at the injustice of all they'd endured, and now they had to deal with the murder of their mother. Anna had had serious mental-health issues, but it was obvious she'd loved her kids, and they had adored her.

She sure as hell did not deserve to die like this.

I thought about her body position as I opened my eyes. Anna had been hit viciously, possibly without warning, which could mean either a crime of passion or vengeance of some kind.

The problem was, I could not see her provoking either one. She could seem crazy, I supposed, although some of her observations were weirdly incisive. In any case, she was not mean or cunning. More helpless than anything.

I shut the entrance to Anna's place, wondering if Emma was behind the

neatness of their home, struggling for order in the middle of the chaos.

I went to Boog's lean-to and knocked on a post holding up one corner of a tarp. To my surprise, the army blanket that served as a door moved, and an attractive woman in her forties with wild, unkempt hair emerged, an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips.

She fixed bloodshot eyes on me, said, "Who you?"

I showed her the badge on my belt.

"Already?" she said, sounding disgusted. "I just got here last night. I ain't done shit."

"Are you Robert Bogner's mother?" I asked.

"Long as I can remember."

"What's your name?"

"Nelly Bogner," she said. "What's that damn kid done now?"

"Lose the attitude," I said, feeling a rush of anger. "You've been gone for a long while. That's child neglect, lady. That is child abuse."

"I never hit my kid," she said defiantly. "And I was out looking for work."

"You find it?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. In Chicago. Singing with a big band in a blues club. I just came to get Boog so we can head to our new life."

I studied her, not knowing if she could be believed. "Where is he?"

"Hell if I know," she said, lighting her cigarette. "We stayed up late talking, but I came all the way from Chicago by bus, you know. I had to sleep. He was gone when I woke up."

"Your son called my partner around five this morning," I said. "He was hysterical because he'd found his friends' mother dead down by the river."

She frowned, then her eyes got wide. "You saying something happened to Anna Bananas?"

"The same."

"Oh, goddamn," Bogner said, the defiance leaving her. She went and sat on one of the five-gallon buckets under the tarp, shaking her head. "Anna could be batshit-crazy sometimes, but she had a good heart."

"I think you're right," I said. "I also think that when your son found Anna's body, he felt threatened and went to get her kids out of here."

"Without telling me?" she said, incredulous.

"Mrs. Bogner, your son has learned to survive on his own in one of the

worst places in the city. With your new job waiting in Chicago, he probably didn't want you involved or in danger. Any idea where he'd go?"

"School, maybe?" she said, sounding irritated. "The soup kitchen at the church? He and Anna and the kids always liked to get breakfast there."

OceanofPDF.com

77

BELOW ME, DOWN ON the rutted road where the Audi had burned, a medical examiner's van bounced toward the murder scene with a forensics crew trailing. Knowing that John Sampson, Tommy Hayes, and Judy Winthrop were focusing on the area around Anna Stein's corpse, I decided to press on and talk to as many people as I could as quickly as I could.

I gave Nelly Bogner my card and made her give me her cell phone number. I told her to contact me immediately if Boog called or texted.

"Sure," she said uncertainly. "You think he's going to be okay?"

Part of me wanted to rip into her again, but I sensed that at least at some level, she was concerned. After all, she was Boog's mother, and he had turned into a pretty solid kid.

"He's one rugged little dude," I said.

I left her there and climbed toward the high trolls on that side of the encampment. On the way, I called Bree and asked her to swing by St. Anthony's and see if any of the three kids had shown up there. I gave her a brief description of Boog, Emma, and Luke. She said she'd let me know.

I found Lainey Locket high up on her observation point on the girder, looking out over the entrance to the ghost ramp, her bohemian clothes flowing in the breeze. She seemed to sense me and turned.

"Is it true, Detective?" Locket asked. "Anna?"

"Yes," I said. "Did you see her kids? Boog?"

She nodded. "They left here before dawn. I like to listen and watch the world waking up, and I saw them running toward the lumberyard in the low light."

"Time?"

"Quarter past five?"

Boog had called Sampson at ten past five, so that fit. I asked her when she'd last seen Anna Bananas.

"Yesterday around two in the afternoon," she replied. "She was upset

and wanted to know what I was doing about the homeless people getting killed."

"What did you say?"

Locket smiled sadly. "I said that being a head high troll under the Bridge to Nowhere did not exactly carry a lot of weight in the real world."

"You heard about Hawk?"

Her nostrils flared. "I never, ever would have called that one."

"Think he's the one behind the murders and the fires?"

She considered it. "Before he blew up a jet, I wouldn't have thought so, no. But now?"

"Well, he was in federal custody last night, so we know for sure that he was not involved in Anna's death. Do you have any idea who might want to kill her or why?"

Locket gazed at me evenly. "Absolutely no one comes to mind. But you might ask the new head high troll of the south embankment. I know Anna was going to talk to him about the killings after she left me."

After asking her to call me if she heard anything—rumor or solid—about this latest murder below the Bridge to Nowhere, I followed her advice. I climbed down the north embankment and up the other side to Sean Brundage's hovel.

It was larger and more complex than it had been the other day, with tarps held up by pieces of rebar, concrete chunks, and wire. The new head high troll of the south was standing in front of it, arms crossed, glaring at Detective Tommy Hayes.

"Sean," I said.

Brundage snarled, "This sad excuse for a cop thinks I'm involved in something nefarious. Who's he think I killed, Cross?"

"Anna Bananas."

The former cop's shoulders sagged as he glanced at me. "Damn. Poor Anna."

"I know," I said.

"He's the big man here now, Cross," Hayes said. "He knows what went down."

"Violence breeds violence in places like this," Brundage retorted. "It's a function of people having no money and no home."

"You would know," Hayes said.

“When did you see Anna last, Sean?” I asked.

“Yesterday afternoon, about three?” the former cop said. “She came up all upset about the homeless folks dying, wanted to know what I was going to do about it. I told her I wasn’t a detective anymore.”

“Got that right,” Hayes said.

Brundage ignored him. “I said that I was cooperating with the police, telling them what I knew, which wasn’t much.”

Hayes sighed, obviously not believing a word.

I said, “And then?”

Brundage said, “She left to get her kids from school.”

“You heard about Hawk?”

When Brundage shook his head, I told him about the incident at the FBO at Dulles the day before. His eyes widened.

“No way,” he said. “I mean, Hawk was always kind of stable, you know? If anyone was going to flip like that at Dulles, I figured it would be Bing Bang.”

Hayes said, “Who’s Bing Bang?”

I frowned. “Colin O’Hare? Why would you say that, Sean?”

Brundage looked from me to Hayes and back again. “Who do you think got him the job? O’Hare had a fill-in gig pumping fuel at that private airfield long before Hawk did.”

OceanofPDF.com

78

I ASKED SEAN BRUNDAGE to contact either me or Sampson if he heard anything about Anna Stein's murder, then I left, motioning to Tommy Hayes to follow me down the embankment.

When we were out of earshot of Sean, Hayes said, "You're not seeing things that are right in front of you, Dr. Cross. We should be bringing Brundage downtown and sweating him. He knows stuff he's not telling us."

"Maybe, but he just gave us an important lead, something he's done several times," I said. "Until that changes, I'm not altering my take on him."

"If you're a good cop, you will eventually," Hayes said firmly. "I'll leave it at that."

My cell rang. Ned Mahoney.

"Ran those names," he said by way of greeting.

"Tell me," I said, walking away from Hayes with my finger in my ear.

"David Lear sold most of his stake last year to Delaware companies described as 'real estate investment entities.'"

"Any overlap with Tatiana Volt or Egon Bijan?"

"Volt," he said. "She's the widow of Arcady Volt, a minor Russian oligarch who died about ten years ago. She moved here shortly afterward, got her green card three years ago, and maintains a very low profile, though she owns a jet and homes in Miami and Aspen. All her investments seem to be in large real estate projects."

"Where a lot of cash moves," I said. "What about Egon Bijan?"

"Appears to be an alias. We have nothing on him. Do you have a photograph? We could run it through facial-recognition software."

"I don't," I said. "I'll ask Bree, but I doubt it. Alejandro Rodriguez?"

"Arraignment in federal court at two."

"How many counts?"

"Eleven so far."

“Let me know how it goes. I’ll keep you updated on my end,” I said and hung up.

The ME and the forensics team were well into their work when I got back to the murder scene. Hayes was standing off to the side having an intense conversation with his partner.

Sampson waved me inside the yellow tape. “ME is estimating time of death around four a.m. And I found a trail of blood moving away from Anna’s body. Killer hit her from behind hard enough to break her skull and spray blood, then walked off with the weapon held low by the left side,” he said, showing me the streaks of blood on the brush and partial footprints in the mud.

I said, “Tall person wearing old sneakers with the weapon held at waist height.”

“Yep,” he agreed. “But not a heavy person. Prints are shallow. They go toward the river, so I called in divers to see if the weapon was tossed in. You find the kids?”

“Negative,” I said. Then, lowering my voice: “Hayes and Winthrop have a jones for Brundage being behind all this.”

“Any evidence of that?”

“None that I’ve seen,” I said. “Boog still not answering?”

“Tried three or four times, left a message telling him to call me ASAP, but nothing yet.”

I told him that I’d asked Bree to look for the kids at the St. Anthony’s breakfast and brought him up to speed on everything I’d learned from Locket, Brundage, and Mahoney.

“You questioning whether Hawk’s our guy on the other murders?” John asked.

“He’s going down on the federal charges even if he was on shrooms, but I think we owe it to ourselves and the victims to look at O’Hare again. Brundage says he has not been around the past few days. And Boog’s mother, Nelly, actually came back.”

“I guess sometimes pigs do fly.”

My phone rang.

“The breakfast line just closed at St. Anthony’s,” Bree reported. “No kids here this morning that fit your description. And I called the schools you said they attend. They haven’t been there, which is evidently a common

occurrence.”

“What happened today isn’t common,” I said. I told her about my conversation with Ned.

“I knew Bijan was off,” she replied. “And an oligarch’s widow, hmm. Nice twist.”

“There has to be a photo of Bijan somewhere,” I said.

“Figure out where Volt’s jet is parked. I’m sure he’ll show up on security cameras wherever that is.”

“Good idea. I’ll text Ned. He must have the tail numbers.”

“I’m going to try to find David Lear and see if he’ll tell me why he cashed out and retired,” Bree said. She wished me luck and hung up.

The ME was putting Anna’s body in a black bag.

Sampson looked over when I put my cell away. “Anything on Boog and friends?”

I shook my head. “Those kids are in the wind or they’ve gone to ground.”

OceanofPDF.com

79

AFTER LEAVING THE ST. ANTHONY'S dining hall, Bree went to work and briefed Elena Martin on everything she'd learned about Jeffrey Frost, Tatiana Volt, and Egon Bijan.

"If Bijan is an alias, then my friend Rosalynn's instincts were spot-on," Martin said. "I'll let her know, and we can assign you to a case that pays."

"Of course," Bree said. "But with your permission, I'd like to try to talk to David Lear, who sold out his position in F and L last year."

"One more nail in the coffin, I suppose. Have at it, then move on, Bree."

"Understood, Elena," she said, and left Martin's office.

It took Bree about fifteen minutes of internet searching to find an address for the right David Lear, now living in Austin, Texas, with his wife, Leigh. She thought for a moment, then called the Frost and Lear offices in Bethesda.

"Frost and Lear, this is Randi," the chirpy aide said.

Bree affected a deep Southern accent: "Kelly Green here for David Lear."

"I'm afraid Mr. Lear has retired."

"That's why the Washington and Lee alumni office has me calling to verify his contact information," Bree said. She'd seen his alma mater listed on his old corporate biography. "Can you confirm his address in Austin?"

Bree read it off, and Randi said, "Uh, yes, that's right."

"And a new home phone?"

"I'm afraid I don't have that. If there even is one these days."

"The cell number is the same?"

"I believe so."

"Can you confirm it for me?" Bree said as sweetly as she could.

"Sure," the receptionist said after a moment, then gave her a number with a Maryland area code.

"You are so helpful, Randi. You have yourself a first-class day, now, you

hear?" She hung up before Randi could reply and immediately punched in Lear's cell number. He answered on the second ring.

"This is David," he said.

"Bree Stone, Mr. Lear," she said. "I am an investigator for Bluestone Group out of Arlington, Virginia, and we're doing some due diligence work for one of our clients."

After a long pause, Lear said, "Okay? What's this about?"

"Frost and Lear projects in the Washington, DC, area."

"I'm no longer affiliated with the company, and I am not at liberty to discuss its projects. I signed a nondisclosure agreement when I sold my stake in the firm. Sorry, Ms. Stone, but—"

"Can I tell you why I called?"

After a pause, he replied, "Unless you've signed an NDA of some sort."

"Let's say we have a hypothetical client—we'll call her Rosalynn," Bree said, and then pretty much repeated what Elena Martin had said. "Is Rosalynn wrong? Are her instincts off, Mr. Lear?"

"I can't say."

"Not even hypothetically?"

After the longest pause yet, Lear said, "Let's say a hypothetical person, Jack, works for years with a hypothetical partner, Bill, only to find out that Bill's ethics are not what they appeared to be. Bill brings in new investors who are… questionable. Jack did not like it, even after Bill told him there was nothing to worry about. But there *was* something to worry about, which led to Jack having a mild heart attack. So Jack sold his stake and retired to play golf in Texas, where he is said to be very happy, not least because he is no longer involved with Bill."

Bree said, "Rosalynn met investors named Tatiana Volt and Egon Bijan."

"Then Rosalynn met two of the questionable folks."

"Egon Bijan appears to be an alias of some sort."

"It would not surprise me," Lear said. "And now, Rosalynn or whatever your name is, I have to go. Tee time calls."

He hung up before Bree could respond.

OceanofPDF.com

80

WHEN WE ARRIVED BACK at our office downtown, we were tired but determined to push forward on all fronts. We learned that Homeland Security had finally given us the CCTV footage from the cameras near Rock Creek Park on the night that Georgetown professor Drake Conway was murdered.

We pulled up the footage from a camera close to the Reservation 630 trail entrance near the Wilshire Park Condos. Two people went down the hiking path from that point that night.

The first person who entered from that angle was tall and wearing a dark floppy hat and a long, black trench coat over baggy black pants. He ducked off the sidewalk on Connecticut Avenue, avoiding the overhead camera, and vanished into the shadows at 12:40 a.m.

Sampson ran through the footage of cameras north and south of the access on Connecticut and caught the same figure cutting across the street and heading into the park.

The second person who went down that path was Professor Conway. He appeared about two a.m. over by the Wilshire Park Condos. He carried the pack I discovered later and a cell phone we had not found. The professor used the phone's flashlight as he went down the path, then disappeared into the darkness of Rock Creek Park and the Reservation 630 trail.

No one else came from or went into the park by that entrance for the rest of the night. But Homeland Security had also given us footage from several other cameras in a half-mile radius of the Wilshire access to the trail, which crossed beneath Connecticut Avenue through a tunnel.

We got lucky looking at a camera on Rodman Street near the intersection with Quebec Place. It turned out that there was another way onto the Reservation 630 trail on the north side of that intersection.

Around ten o'clock the night that Professor Conway was killed, a big, athletic guy wearing a black ball cap, a dark windbreaker, black running

shorts, and a gray hydration pack crossed Quebec Place and went down the trail.

“That pack could be carrying gas instead of water,” Sampson said.

Just before we lost sight of him, the guy flipped on a headlamp, and there was the barest suggestion of his face in silhouette before he was gone, heading toward the tunnel under Connecticut Avenue.

“Back up,” I said. “Does that look like Colin O’Hare?”

“Iffy,” Sampson said after he’d reversed the footage and frozen it.

“Maybe not,” I agreed.

Forty minutes later, the headlamp came back. Same guy, same pack, but we got a better look at him.

“That’s definitely not Bing Bang,” I said.

“Just a guy out for a run with a hydration pack.”

“Any more cameras in the area?”

“One more to check, the parking lot near the picnic tables about four hundred yards northeast of where Conway was found,” Sampson said, pulling the footage up on his computer. “This lot is open twenty-four hours a day. And it’s just north of the Reservation trail where it meets the Western Ridge trail.”

Starting at ten o’clock on the night of the murder, an infrequent succession of vehicles drove down Shoemaker Street, passed the Hungarian embassy, and went into the lot. A few parked; the people inside talked, then the cars left. But most of the vehicles just came in, turned around, their headlights sweeping the grassy picnic area, and left.

At 1:19 a.m., a white Chevy Malibu appeared. The license plate’s lights were off, and we could not make out the numbers. The sedan turned left and parked in one of the spaces closest to the woods and the intersection of the hiking trails. The driver got out; he was wearing dark sweatpants and a dark sweatshirt, hood up.

“That’s a big, big dude,” Sampson said. “Could be Hawk.”

“Or O’Hare.”

We were seeing the guy from probably a hundred yards away, but he towered over the roof of his car as he walked around the back. He opened the trunk, reached in, and came out with a gas can.

“It’s him!” we both yelled and watched the Firebug walk into the shadows and vanish into darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

81

I RETURNED HOME FEELING weighed down by the day's events—seeing Anna Stein's body, not finding the kids, and then watching the faceless Firebug on video as he went into the park to ambush, kill, and burn Professor Conway.

The house was bustling. Ali and Damon were watching the Red Sox play Baltimore. My aunts were twenty-five minutes from delivering another magnificent meal: chicken Marsala, roast broccoli, and rice. Bree was sitting by Nana Mama's bed and studying her iPad.

My grandmother was dozing when Bobby Jain came over to give me the day's report. On the whole, he said, it had been another up-and-down day for the patient.

In the morning, Nana had twice gone to the bathroom using the walker, and she ate breakfast and lunch upright in bed. But following her afternoon nap, she'd been as confused as she'd been the day before.

"She thought Jannie's next race was today and she was upset that you all weren't at Notre Dame to watch," the nurse said softly.

Bree came over. "I was able to calm her down, and she seemed better when she fell asleep again. Especially because your father called and said he was flying up tomorrow to see her. Alicia was released from the hospital yesterday."

"Her surgery went well, then?" I was glad to hear good news about my dad's wife.

"Yes, and her sister is going to take care of her so your dad can come."

"Good," I said. "That's real good. It will raise Nana's spirits."

Then I flashed on the Firebug's first victim in the vacant lot behind the condemned building that F and L owned in Northeast DC. My dad would no doubt ask about Charlie. And if he did, I'd have to tell him and probably my grandmother what I knew—that he was homeless and last seen squatting in that same building.

“Alex?” Nana Mama said.

I went to her bedside. “Look at you, Rip van Winkle.”

She smiled. “Twenty years?”

“Not quite,” I said, grinning because she had not lost her sense of humor. “You hungry?”

My grandmother nodded.

“I’ll have Connie bring you something blended up,” Bree said.

She shook her head. “Speech.”

Bobby the night nurse said, “The speech pathologist did a swallowing eval on her and said she was good to try something more solid in small pieces.”

“That’s great,” I said, and Nana beamed at me before her gaze drifted.

“Wake me ready,” she said.

“Will do,” I promised. Bree put her hand on my forearm and made a motion with her head that we should leave the room. We went to the front hall. Ali and Damon were still absorbed in the baseball game.

She told me about her discussion with David Lear, then said, “Ned hasn’t gotten back to me on the registration on Volt’s plane yet, but he has to be swamped with the whole Hawk thing. Any sign of those kids?”

“None,” I said. “I’ll contact the cell carriers tomorrow to see if their phones can be tracked—or Boog’s phone, anyway. And we caught something of a break on CCTV footage around Rock Creek Park.”

Using her iPad, I signed into my department site and called up the footage of the Firebug.

“Big guy,” she said, watching. “Is Hawk this big?”

I nodded. “Give or take an inch. But then again, so is Colin ‘Bing Bang’ O’Hare. Both big ex–Special Forces operators with access to jet fuel. Problem is, we never get a good look at this guy’s face coming or going. He has the hood up when he leaves the park at three forty-two.”

I hit Play and we watched as the Firebug rushed out of the darkness of Rock Creek Park, hood still up, still carrying the gas can. He tossed it in the Malibu’s trunk, jumped in the driver’s seat, and left the picnic area with his headlights off and the visor down, covering his upper face.

For less than a second, though, his lower face was visible in the glare from one of the parking lot’s sodium lights. I froze it there.

“The image is somewhat distorted by the curvature of the windshield,” I

said. “But distortion or not, this guy has a big square jaw. And so do Hawk and O’Hare.”

Bree said nothing for a moment. “I hate to complicate things for you, but Egon Bijan is also as big as this guy, with a cinder block for a noggin. And if Tatiana Volt owns a plane, then Mr. Bijan has access to avgas.”

OceanofPDF.com

82

AUNT HATTIE OUTDID HERSELF with dinner. And Nana Mama was alert and ate her entire meal on her own with a spoon, which pleased her and everyone else.

"You open… café," Nana Mama said. "Hattie. Me first…"

"Customer?" Ali said.

"Mmm," Nana said, gazing at me. "Jason come."

"I heard that. Happy?"

She smiled. "Been while."

"Too long," I said.

I was looking forward to seeing my dad as well. I'd thought he was dead for many years, but after I'd found him, in a lot of ways, my dad had become one of my heroes.

"Too long," Nana agreed. "Jannie?"

Damon said, "She's training, Nana."

She nodded. "Finals?"

"Next week," I said.

"I go."

I glanced at the night nurses. Bobby shrugged. "I guess she could if you charter an air ambulance. But that costs a *lot* of money."

"Got it," Nana said. "Lotto."

Ali said, "She hit it a few years ago."

"Then it's up to you," Bobby said.

"I wouldn't know how to even start to set something like that up," I said.

Bree said, "I'll look into it."

"Fun," my grandmother said and grinned. "Notre Dame."

"I guess you're going, then," I said, marveling at her strength of will.

"Good," she said, still smiling. She closed her eyes.

I went to her side, figuring she was done for the night but wanting to gaze at her, to study every line and plane of her face. Because, honestly,

given her age and her condition, I did not know how many more times I'd have the chance.

Nana Mama came around again, saw me there. As if she knew what I was keeping from her, she said quietly, "Where Charlie?"

There it was. I glanced over at the hustle and bustle in the kitchen where Bree and the boys were helping the aunts clean up. Then I sighed. It was impossible for me to lie to my grandmother.

"I have some sad news about Charlie, Nana," I said quietly. "He had drug and alcohol problems. He lost his job, and he and Ellen split up."

Her brows knit and she sucked her cheeks in, the joy of anticipating a trip to the NCAA finals gone. "Where he?"

"I've been trying to find him so I could ask him to come see you."

As I said, it was impossible for me to lie to her, but I could not bring myself to mention my fears that Charlie might've been the first victim of the Firebug. I just could not do it to her.

"Find him," she said. "Lotto. Get Charlie help."

I bobbed my head. "I can do that. We can do that for him, Nana. That's a very good idea."

"Like that," she said, closing her eyes again. "Much."

OceanofPDF.com

83

THE NEXT MORNING, FEELING not the slightest bit of guilt over withholding some information about Charlie from my grandmother, I studied the toxicology reports and phone records of the murdered Georgetown professor Drake Conway. John Sampson did the same with the records for the late Corey McGovern and Reverend Dylan Sentinel.

Though the fire had messed with the chemistry of all three bodies, it was clear Conway had been intoxicated when he died. He'd also had barbiturates in his system.

It turned out Sentinel had too. And McGovern was high on ecstasy when she was killed.

Most interesting to me was that, according to his cell phone records, the professor had called the same number multiple times in the twenty-four hours before his death; eight of those calls were made in the hour before he entered Rock Creek Park.

I called the number and got an out-of-service recording. Probably another burner.

"Corey made a bunch of calls the night she was murdered," Sampson said from behind his desk opposite me. "But she called one number four times."

"Burner?"

"Probably. Now out of service."

"Are you in her phone?" I asked. He nodded. I gave him the number that Conway had been calling. "Do you see it in her contacts?"

He started typing and his head came up. "Bing Bang."

"Really?"

"No doubt."

"Well, that changes things," I said. "Let's start checking the homeless camps for O'Hare and the kids."

We made a short stop at the Bridge to Nowhere. Nelly, Boog's mother,

was now worried sick about her son and Anna's kids—and she was also anxious because she needed to return to Chicago to start her new job. We talked to Sean Brundage, who said he had not seen any of them but was looking for Colin O'Hare himself.

"You find him, you call us," Sampson said. "We would much appreciate it."

"By the way, you look good, Sean," I said as we prepared to leave the high troll.

"Miracle what cutting your booze intake in half will do," the former police detective said.

After visiting two other encampments, we headed to the ravine behind the Avid Eyeball strip club. We showed the people there O'Hare's military ID photo, which we'd gotten from the FBI, and pictures of Boog, Emma, and Luke from their school IDs.

No one in the ravine recognized any of them. Or at least admitted to recognizing them.

It was almost four when we climbed out and went over to the Avid Eyeball. Sampson noticed that a few of the sad guys who'd been in the parking lot waiting when he'd come by the first time were there again.

A woman—Sampson told me her name was Milly White—came to the door of the Avid Eyeball the second she saw us approach.

"Hi, Detective," she said to Sampson, then leaned around him and yelled at the guys getting out of their cars, "Not yet, you horndogs!"

We went into the air-conditioned lobby. Sampson showed her O'Hare's photo. "You know him?"

She studied it. "Yeah. Scruffier now. He's a big guy and can get belligerent. We have to limit his booze intake."

It was a momentarily exciting lead. But when we checked out the interior and exterior camera feeds from the night Corey McGovern was murdered, there was no sign of the former Special Forces operator. We thanked White and crossed the parking lot to the tool-rental place.

Mimi Wallace said she didn't recognize O'Hare, but she did allow us to watch more footage from around the time of McGovern's death. Once again, we saw the girl exit the Uber, cross the expanse of the Avid Eyeball's parking lot, and head for the front door. We watched the comings and goings of men from the strip club for the next hour, all of whom we'd

already seen coming and going in the Avid Eyeball's own footage.

The last two guys, both wearing football jerseys, came out around two a.m. They climbed into a Prius and drove away, leaving the lot empty.

"Rewind, Mimi," Sampson said. "I didn't catch this before. But as the good ol' boys climb in the Prius, I think someone's moving back along the edge of the ravine."

Wallace reversed the footage, and the Prius moved backward until John said, "Stop."

She froze the image and the three of us squinted at the screen. Sampson was right—there was indeed a blurry outline of someone very large in the shadows above the ravine.

"Can you reverse it in slow motion?" Sampson asked. Wallace did, and we watched until the figure stepped into an area illuminated by the rental shop's security lights. "There! Freeze!" He looked at Wallace's keyboard. "May I?"

She nodded. Sampson reached over and typed a command to magnify the image.

"That's O'Hare," we both said.

OceanofPDF.com

84

WE PUT OUT AN APB on Colin O'Hare, then went to the federal detention center in Alexandria, Virginia, to talk to Alejandro Rodriguez.

At first the former Special Forces operator refused to see us, but when we let him know that we wanted to talk about Bing Bang, Hawk reluctantly came out.

He gazed at us evenly through the bulletproof glass. "What's Colin done now?" he asked, phone to his ear. "And what's in it for me if I talk to you?"

"What's in it for you depends on what you tell us," I said. "But honestly, I don't know how much we can do for you, given that you blew up a plane. Even if you were high on mushrooms at the time."

He pondered that, then said, "You still haven't said anything about Colin."

"We think he's the Firebug, Hawk. We think *he*, not you, killed Corey McGovern. As well as the guy in the Audi and others."

Hawk raised an eyebrow. "Well, there you go. Bing Bang was known for pushing the envelope in Afghanistan. Sadistic asshole at times, I heard. Liked his knife. And, come to think of it, O'Hare was always negative about Corey's… you know, extracurricular activities."

"Why didn't you tell us any of this before?" Sampson demanded. "Like when she showed up dead."

"I had no idea O'Hare was still around, man," Rodriguez said. "Hadn't seen him in a while. Some people were saying that he was the guy who got shot and burned near that abandoned building in Northeast."

I said, "Why would they say that? Did he live there?"

"Time to time, I believe. Choir Boy too. But it wasn't like I followed Bing Bang around keeping track, you know."

Hawk suggested we visit a couple of homeless camps we had not known about, one in Prince George's County, Maryland, and another over in Fairfax, Virginia. He was sad to hear of Anna's death and seemed upset that

her kids and Boog had vanished.

"You think he has the kids?" Hawk asked. "Bing Bang?"

Sampson and I glanced at each other.

"If he does, how bad would it be?" John asked.

The former Special Forces operator sobered, shaking his head as if to rid himself of a biting fly or an equally biting memory. "If Bing Bang is the Firebug, and Anna and her kids and Boog knew, then all bets are off. Especially if he gets to drinking and has a blade in his pocket."

I got a text from Bree as we left the detention facility. My dad had arrived from Florida, and Nana Mama was asking for me to come home.

Sampson said he'd canvass the homeless camps Hawk had told us to check out and promised to call for backup if there was any evidence that O'Hare was around. I went home wondering how I was going to tell my dad about Charlie.

I got home around four that afternoon and found my father by my grandmother's side. He was a little grayer at the temples and in the mustache, but no less robust than the last time I'd seen him.

"Hi, Dad," I called to him, grinning. I greeted Bree, then walked over to where Nana Mama was holding court in the living room.

My dad turned to me, exposing the scar from the brutal facial wound that he'd suffered during the First Gulf War when an oil well he was trying to secure exploded. The blast had killed two men and laid open my dad's cheek, leaving him with extensive nerve damage that often made him appear expressionless. But there was no hiding his enthusiasm when he stood and came toward me with his big paw of a hand extended.

His hand enveloped mine, and then his hug enveloped me. "So good to see you, Alex. So very good."

I'd be lying if I said I did not get choked up. He'd been back in my life for several years now, but reuniting with him always brought up old and deep emotions of loss and abandonment. My adult brain knew exactly why he'd left me and my brothers, why he'd created a whole new life for himself. But sometimes it was hard to silence the pain of the little kid who still dwelled inside me.

OceanofPDF.com

85

TEARS WELLED IN MY eyes as we pulled apart.

“Good to see you too, Dad,” I said, wiping at my eyes with my sleeve. “I’m glad you could come.”

“Soon as I knew Alicia was stable and in good hands, I was on my way.”

“The surgeries went well, then?”

“Her hip and her femur were badly fractured, but they’re all put back together with screws and plates now,” my father said. “And they’ve got her up on her feet already. Can you imagine? One week later and she’s up.”

Nana Mama asked, “Lot pain?”

“Surprisingly, she says not much, Mom,” he said, going over to her. “She’s not even taking narcotics anymore.”

“Lucky.”

“Very. Both of us are.”

“Like Alicia.”

“I do too,” he said, beaming at her and then at me.

My dad’s wife, Reverend Alicia Maya, was a good woman who’d helped him turn his life around. “She’s always stood by you,” I said.

“So when am I going to see those grandkids of mine?” he asked.

“Before dinner, I expect. Damon and Ali are out but they’ll be back soon, and I asked Jannie to come over too.”

“I am so proud of that girl. It’s incredible what she’s done,” my father said. “I read all about it.”

My grandmother said, “Notre Dame.”

I explained. “Nana is determined to see her great-granddaughter run in the NCAA finals in Indiana next week.”

“Is that so,” he said, then scratched his chin. “Wonder if I can make that too. Any chance for Grandpa to get a ticket?”

I grinned. “I think that could be arranged.”

Despite the pressures of my current cases, I felt all my worries fade

away in the glow of my family. It was a real reunion, with lots of laughter and old stories told and retold. My dad caught up with his sisters-in-law Hattie and Connie Lou, and there were cheers and hugs for Ali and Damon when they came home. The biggest roar of the evening came when Jannie arrived just before dinner. We all congratulated her on running very, very fast, and she told us that her coach felt she was preparing perfectly for the final meet of the year.

Sampson came over with Willow, and after telling me he'd struck out at the homeless camps in Virginia and Maryland, he spent some time with my dad.

After dinner, my father and I took a walk, and he asked about Nana.

"What's the prognosis?"

"For an ordinary woman of ninety-something? Not good. But your mother has defied the odds time and again."

"She has indeed," he said. Then he took a breath. "Tell me about Charlie."

Nana Mama must have said something to my dad. "I'm looking for him, and I'll find him," I said, holding my tongue again about my fears that he might've been the Firebug's first victim. My dad had gone through a lot over the years, and I knew he was still racked with guilt at abandoning me and my brothers. I did not want to add to that guilt needlessly.

"I know you'll find him, son," he said when we arrived back at the house. "I've seen how dogged you can be. Let's go inside and enjoy ourselves for now."

So that's what we did. The evening was a real celebration for the Cross family and our dear friends, and it provided some much-needed downtime before the darkness that loomed ahead.

OceanofPDF.com

86

THE NEXT MORNING, JOHN SAMPSON and I went to the station downtown and tried to regroup and focus on finding the kids. Boog, Emma, and Luke had been missing for a while now, and we were beginning to fear that Hawk's suspicions about O'Hare were correct.

"Cross, Sampson," Chief Kane said, marching into the squad room. "I need you on a homicide in Northeast."

"We're swamped," Sampson said. "What about Hayes and Winthrop?"

"They're surveilling a former Metro cop they think is the Firebug."

"You mean Sean Brundage?" I asked. "No, Chief. No. They are so off base."

"Whether they're off base or not, they're not here," Kane said. "But you're gonna want this case. Firebug's first victim was found behind a condemned building, and this victim was found inside that same building."

Sampson looked at me and stood up. "We're on our way," he said.

"Yeah. Sorry about giving you a hard time, Chief," I said.

"I'm pretty tough. Don't sweat it," Kane said, and I thought, not for the first time, that he was essentially a good guy. As he was leaving, he added, "Just nail the Firebug and everything will be fine."

Thirty minutes later, Sampson and I were waved past yellow tape across an opening in the chain-link fence. Bree had described the abandoned building to me in detail, but I was still unprepared for the reality of the stench. We put on booties and gloves and followed the directions from the patrol officer who'd been the first on the scene; he was sent by dispatch after an anonymous call.

As we climbed the stairs, I remembered that Hawk said Bing Bang lived here off and on. He and my brother must have used these stairs.

When we reached the third-floor landing, we stopped, put camphor on cotton balls, and put them in our nostrils. The smell of a corpse was unmistakable.

“Officer said third door on the left,” Sampson said as we walked down the hall.

I nodded. Choir Boy had said that Charlie’s stuff was in a room on the third floor. I hesitated for a moment outside that door, unable to follow my partner inside.

I finally forced myself to do it and saw that the body was that of a long, lean, well-dressed Caucasian male. *Not Charlie*.

The corpse was lying on his side in a coagulated puddle of blood that had come from an exit wound in the upper right parietal. The body was beginning to bloat, the face already puffy.

Sampson went to the victim and searched his pockets, and I looked around the room. My stomach dropped ten stories when I spotted something familiar by the wall. I took two steps in that direction and froze.

“Meet the owner of this hellhole,” Sampson said, holding a wallet aloft.

I barely responded.

“Alex,” he said. “You hear me? Our vic is the guy who’s tearing this place down.”

I pivoted slowly, wondering how it all fit. “Jeffrey Frost?”

“That’s what his ID says.” Sampson peered at me. “What’s going on with you, sugar? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I pointed to the crumpled clothes in the corner. “That Ravens wool cap there,” I said, emotion surging in my throat. “And that filthy old baseball coach’s jacket. They’re both my brother’s, John. They’re Charlie’s.”

OceanofPDF.com

87

WHILE JOHN SAMPSON CALLED in the medical examiner and forensics, I stood by Jeffrey Frost's body, but I stared at my brother's clothes six feet away. Part of me wanted to go over and pick up the wool cap and jacket, but I knew full well I could not. If Charlie was alive and visiting the place, he might have been surprised by Frost, fought, and…

I looked around but saw nothing to suggest a struggle had occurred. In fact, now that I took in the rest of the scene, I could not determine how Jeffrey Frost's corpse had gotten here. There were no footprints in the room, not even his.

Sampson had noticed that too. When he hung up the phone, he gestured at the floor. "Someone went to a lot of trouble to sweep the dust on the way out," he said.

I moved closer to the developer's body, looked down at it from my full height, then squatted near Frost's shoulders.

"Except right here," I said. "Shooter ordered Frost to the ground, then angled the barrel so the shot would drive brain matter out of the top of his head and avoid the rebound spatter from a straight-through shot into the floor. And look at the skin stippling around the wound. The gun barrel was two inches away, maybe less."

I studied the halo of dried blood below Frost's head, saw some smears in it. "Shooter picked up his spent shell, then swept his way out."

"Feels professional."

"Hundred percent pro. I'm going to get Bree's take," I said, pulling out my phone.

"Smart," Sampson said. He went to the glassless window and looked out. "Forensics is here. I'll show them the way."

Bree answered on the second ring. I told her what we'd found.

"Wow," she said. "Wow, wow, wow. Execution-style?"

"What it looks like," I said. "Shot Frost through the temple at close

range, picked up his brass, and swept his way out."

"I knew Frost was into something nasty. Sounds like it caught up with him."

"It did. So who takes control of this property and the ones around the Bridge to Nowhere now that Frost is dead?"

She paused, then said, "You'll have to check his will, talk to his corporate counsel. But I'm going to bet that his closest relatives will not be the beneficiaries."

"The Russian woman?"

"Tatiana Volt," Bree said. "That's who I'd be focused on."

My phone beeped with a call from Sean Brundage. "I have to take this."

"Talk soon," she said and hung up.

"Sean," I said. "Where are you?"

"Library," the former detective said. "Look, my phone's almost dead, but I just discovered something you should know. Colin O'Hare's late aunt Marie O'Hare was married to Professor Drake Conway."

"The Georgetown vic? Well, that adds to the pot, doesn't it," I said. "Impressive, Sean. How did you figure this out?"

"Library computer," he said. "Ancestry.com."

I knew Detectives Winthrop and Hayes were surveilling the former Metro detective, and I was about to warn him when Brundage said, "Gotta go, Cross. I have high-troll duties to deal with." He hung up.

I told Sampson about Brundage's discovery.

"Didn't see that one coming, but we know the professor was calling the burner number that Corey McGovern had listed as Bing Bang's," Sampson said. "And it makes sense that the person Conway agreed to meet in the middle of the night was a relative. Hopefully this means we can get cell records to tell us exactly where O'Hare entered the park."

I stood aside to let two forensics techs into the room, which suddenly felt small. I left Sampson to supervise and walked down the hall to the back of the building. I gazed out a window at the empty lot, seeing the scorched ring of weeds superimposed on the images of Charlie's hat and jacket.

"What were you into, brother?" I muttered. "And how in God's name did you—"

"Alex?" a voice said behind me. "John said you were back here."

I turned to see Dr. Janice Taylor, the assistant medical examiner.

“Hi, Janice,” I said. “You the lucky one who pulled this case?”

“I am.” She smiled and held up her hands. “And I apologize. I have no excuse other than things tend to pile up on my desk.”

“I’m not following.”

“The DNA test on the first Firebug victim came back yesterday,” she said. “I compared it to your cheek-swab DNA. It’s not your brother, Alex.”

OceanofPDF.com

88

MY KNEES FELT WOBBLY enough that I grabbed the window frame. “You’re sure?”

“It’s not even close, Alex,” the forensic pathologist assured me. “I’m so, so sorry I didn’t see the report yesterday when it came in.”

“It happens!” I said, suddenly giddy. Charlie was alive. Alive! Or at least, he wasn’t the victim found here. “Thank you, Janice,” I said, feeling a little breathless. “Thank you. Thank you. This changes everything for me, for my family.”

“I figured it might,” Dr. Taylor said. “I’m happy for you, Alex.”

“Just have to find him now,” I said. “Get him out of places like this for good.”

She smiled. “If anyone can do that, it’s you.”

“Glad you have that kind of faith in me, Janice. And now we both need to get back to what we are paid so richly to do.”

As we headed to the front of the apartment building, I told Taylor about the jacket and wool hat in the room with the corpse.

She frowned, glanced at me. “You don’t think *Charlie’s* the killer, do you?”

“If those are his clothes, they have to be accounted for. But no. This looks like a professional hit. And my brother always hated guns.”

“He could have been a witness. Maybe Charlie was watching when the killer came in and shot the vic in cold blood.”

“True,” I said, though I couldn’t see it. The only evidence that he’d been in the room was his clothes, and who knew how long they’d been there. Could have been a day, a month, or longer.

Taylor went in to examine the body, and I walked up and down the hall, studying the floor and feeling frustrated at the absence of footprints. I suspected we wouldn’t find any fingerprints either. Not if this was the work of a pro.

My phone rang—Bree. She had spoken to Frost's receptionist, Randi—Bree wasn't sure why the woman was in the office on a Saturday, but she was—and Randi told her that the developer was away and unavailable.

"He was supposed to have flown to Atlanta the evening before last," Bree said. "He was going to see a Braves game yesterday and then meet with bankers this morning about a project he had going down there."

"She doesn't know he's dead?"

"I doubt it, and I didn't say anything. Figured I'd leave that part of the policing to you."

"I'll head over there once Taylor establishes time of death," I said. "Thanks, Bree."

"Anything for you, baby," she said.

I went back into the room. After forensics documented the body in situ, we rolled it over, hoping to find a cell phone. We didn't.

"Just means we'll have to do this the hard way and get the info from his service provider," Sampson said.

"Amazing we have that tool when we need it," I said.

We left the condemned building late that afternoon, shortly after the body was removed. Janice Taylor had told us that Frost died roughly forty-five hours ago, which put the gun at his head at just about the time he should have been on a flight to Atlanta.

We drove straight to the Frost and Lear offices in Bethesda. The sight of me and Sampson was more than enough to rattle Randi, the receptionist.

"Is it bad?" she said, wringing her hands. "I've been trying to reach Mr. Frost for almost two days, but he does this kind of thing sometimes. Not answering me, I mean. That's why I'm here on a Saturday. I thought he might call the office."

"I'm afraid Mr. Frost is dead, Randi," I said.

She reacted like I'd slapped her and sat down hard. "What? No."

"He was murdered at an apartment building in Northeast the night before last," Sampson said. "One of the derelict ones the company owns."

The young receptionist was crying. "The Northeast one? This whole time? Dead?"

"We believe so," I replied. "Randi, do you know why he went to that apartment building when he was supposed to be flying to Atlanta?"

"No, I don't," she said. "It's not like he confided in me."

“His phone’s missing,” Sampson said. “Who was he talking with before he left?”

Randi threw her hands up in the air. “I have no idea. All Mr. Frost did was talk on the phone, all day long. One call after another.”

After she composed herself, the receptionist gave us the number for the company’s corporate counsel, Blanche Gray, an attorney in Bethesda. Randi said she always answered her phone, even on weekends.

Sampson and I stepped away from the receptionist; Sampson called Gray and put it on speaker. After informing her of Jeffrey Frost’s death, he asked who would control the various projects that Frost had had in development.

“I’m kind of in shock here, Detective, and I’m not at liberty to disclose that,” Gray said. “Attorney-client privilege.”

“Except this is a murder investigation, Counselor,” Sampson growled. “Who controls the developments now that Frost is dead?”

“It’s… complicated,” Gray stammered. “Depends on each development. There are syndicates of investors, each of whom could lay claim to pieces of them. I’d have to go through each project to tell you exactly.”

I said, “Can you tell us if Tatiana Volt is one of those investors?”

After a brief silence, she said, “I can confirm that Mrs. Volt is an active investor in several projects, but I cannot say with certainty whether she would take control of any of them.”

“Sounds like a dodge,” Sampson said.

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” Gray said. “I’ve been on the job for only three months. I came in after their old counsel died of a heart attack. I would have to come to the Frost and Lear offices and study the various deals before I could give you anything definitive.”

“Then I suggest you do that,” I said. “We’ll be waiting.”

Sampson had no sooner hung up with the attorney than my phone rang.

“It’s Kane,” I told Sampson as I answered. “Chief?”

“Sean Brundage is armed and on the move,” the chief of detectives said. “Hayes and Winthrop are following him. They think the Firebug’s about to strike again.”

OceanofPDF.com

89

JOHN SAMPSON AND I warned the receptionist that a patrol officer would be there within minutes to seal the place shut. She was to leave and take nothing but her personal property.

“Does this mean I’m out of a job?” Randi said, crying again.

“I can’t tell you that,” I said. “Talk to Frost’s attorney when she gets here. And tell her she can make copies of document files if she needs to, but she is not to remove anything from the premises.”

“Where are you going?” she said.

Sampson said, “To do damage control.”

We took the elevator down and ran to our car. Sampson jumped behind the wheel, said, “I’ll call Judy Winthrop. I have a decent relationship with her, better than with Tommy Hayes.”

“I’ve got Brundage,” I said, and punched in his number. I got a message saying his mailbox was full.

I texted him to call me just as Winthrop answered John’s call. “What’s this about Brundage?” Sampson demanded and put the phone on speaker as we started toward the District.

“It’s like we told you, he’s a bad, bad guy,” Winthrop replied coldly. “Tommy’s snitch under the Bridge to Nowhere saw him retrieve a pistol from behind some rocks in what used to be Hawk’s old troll camp.”

“And?”

“And then he gave us the slip—climbed up through a hole in the ramp and ran down the other side where we couldn’t see him,” she said. “Our informant told us where we’d probably pick him up again, and we did. We are now in active pursuit on foot.”

“Where?”

“Just left Foggy Bottom Metro, heading northwest. Sorry, got to go.”

She hung up. Sampson groaned. “This does not feel right.”

“I’ll try Brundage again,” I said and hit Redial.

To my surprise, he picked up on the second ring.

“Cross,” the former police detective said, huffing. “Sorry, I was underground.”

“Where are you?”

“Southeast, where else?”

John and I looked at each other, knowing that was a lie. “What are you up to?”

There was a long pause during which all we could hear was him breathing hard. He said, “I’m following Bing Bang. If I can, I’m gonna make a citizen’s arrest.”

He hung up before I could tell him how dumb that idea was, especially if he was armed with a weapon that did not belong to him.

I wasn’t sure whom to believe at this point. I called Tommy Hayes. “Brundage says he is following Colin O’Hare and is planning to make a citizen’s arrest.”

“That’s bull,” Hayes said, panting. “We’ve seen nothing of O’Hare, and yes, we have his picture and description from your APB.”

“Brundage still heading northwest?”

“North side of M Street, just crossed Thirty-Fourth. We’re on the south side of M, and—”

He was cut off by the screeching of tires and then a crash.

“Goddamn bus rear-ended a car right in front of us,” Hayes shouted into the phone, and we heard his partner yell, “I’ve lost him!” The call ended.

The second we crossed the District line, Sampson slammed the bubble on the roof and lit up the siren.

“If O’Hare is there, we better be the ones who take him,” he said and floored it.

OceanofPDF.com

90

WE RACED SOUTH, LISTENING to the radio chatter. Dusk was falling when Judy Winthrop radioed to say the high troll of the south had just turned west onto N Street and was running toward Thirty-Seventh. We were turning off Wisconsin onto N Street when our radio lit up.

The dispatcher said, “Metro detectives on foot and in pursuit of armed and dangerous individual who has entered Georgetown University grounds, southeast corner of campus, Healy Lawn area. Detectives calling for campus police to issue active-shooter alert to all students. Repeat, active-shooter alert on Georgetown campus.”

“What are Winthrop and Hayes doing?” Sampson shouted, pounding the steering wheel as we accelerated down N, four blocks from the campus entrance closest to Healy Lawn. “They’re asking for chaos!”

He grabbed for the radio mic. I got it first but didn’t use it immediately. “Let’s not make things worse, John. We’re not on the scene yet. We do not have eyeballs on the situation.”

“Get dispatch to patch us into all transmissions coming from Winthrop, Hayes, and campus police!” he said, weaving by vehicles that were in our way.

I made the ask, and almost immediately we heard Hayes say that Brundage was cutting diagonally across Healy Lawn, heading northwest, deeper into campus. Sampson swung us north onto Thirty-Seventh and raced to the South Gatehouse entrance to Georgetown University, still with the siren on and the bubble flashing.

A security guard tried to stop us, but Sampson drove straight past him, yelling, “We’re on the shooter!”

But instead of driving quickly to the northwest corner of Healy Lawn, we were caught in the very chaos John had predicted.

Though classes were winding down with the end of the school year, there were still several thousand students and faculty members on campus,

even on a weekend. When the alert went out over cell phones, people were terrified. They began running in every direction, including right at us, trying to get off the grounds or to a safe place.

We couldn't move. Sampson threw the car in park, got out, and jumped on the hood. He looked east over the sea of students.

"There's Brundage, heading toward the performing arts center," he yelled down to me and leaped off the hood.

Even when he was at ease, Sampson—who stood six nine and weighed around two seventy-five—was an imposing figure. But when he was on the attack or in pursuit, he became a creature to be avoided at all costs.

"Metro PD!" he shouted, running toward the students, badge and gun out. "Out of the way! Metro PD! Metro PD!" I was right behind him.

Terrified students jumped aside. Eighty yards ahead of us, Detectives Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes ran across Old N Way and into an alley by the Davis Performing Arts Center.

We reached the alley, crowded with cars and delivery vans, and heard a shot echo from the far end. Students started screaming and stampeding behind us. Sampson jumped up on the hood of one of the vans, looked north, and said, "I think Colin O'Hare just went over the fence to the cemetery. Sean Brundage is right behind him."

"Who's doing the shooting?" I gasped as we ran down the alley, weaving around all the vehicles there.

As if in answer, dispatch said over our radios, "Detectives report shots fired on Georgetown campus north of Davis Performing Arts. Repeat, suspect is confirmed active shooter."

OceanofPDF.com

91

“GODDAMN BRUNDAGE!” JOHN SAMPSON shouted. “What does he think he’s doing?”

I was just trying to keep up. I glanced ahead and saw Judy Winthrop and Tommy Hayes leaping over a low wrought-iron fence around the cemetery.

By the time we got there, Sean Brundage had gone out a gate on the far side with the two detectives about fifty yards behind him. Winthrop squared off, threw up her service pistol, and fired at the former police detective.

“No!” I shouted, seeing people on the other side of the fence diving for cover as Brundage ran past them. “You’ll hit a civilian!”

The former cop and his pursuers were out of sight when Sampson and I got to the other side of the cemetery. We asked hysterical bystanders which way the shooters had gone, and they pointed us west, past the field house and the business school.

We heard another gunshot just before we spotted Detective Winthrop. She was running through the parking lot near the university’s observatory. We sprinted after her as we heard her partner barking over the radio: “Suspect has entered Foundry Branch Valley Park. Repeat, suspect has—”

The transmission was cut off by two shots in rapid succession and then a third. We entered the darkening woods forty yards behind Winthrop and heard voices ahead and below.

“Stay down, Brundage!” Hayes shouted. “Stay the hell down!”

“You shot me!” Brundage screamed back. “And O’Hare is getting away!”

“I don’t care! I got you!”

“You idiot, Hayes! I had him and you let him go!”

We pushed through a tangle of vines and brush to find Detectives Hayes and Winthrop with their weapons aimed at the homeless former detective, who’d been shot through the right arm and was bleeding badly. I went to Brundage, took off my jacket, and pressed it against the wound while

Sampson called for an ambulance.

"You had to shoot him?" I asked the detectives.

"He shot first," Hayes said.

"I did not shoot at *you*, bonehead," Brundage said through gritted teeth. "I shot at O'Hare after *he* shot at *me*!"

Winthrop shook her head. "We never saw O'Hare."

"Really?" Sampson demanded. "I sure as hell saw one very big dude go over that cemetery fence before Brundage did."

"Never saw him," Hayes insisted. "Must have been a football player or something."

"It was O'Hare!" Brundage said again. "He came through the Bridge to Nowhere two hours ago and I've been following him ever since. I know who I was after."

"Security cameras will tell us the truth," Sampson said.

"You saying we're lying?" Winthrop said. "Is that it?"

"Not lying," I said as sirens came at us from a dozen directions. "Just mistaken. Possibly. We'll know soon enough. Why didn't you wait for us, Sean?"

Brundage grimaced and then sighed. "I wanted that citizen's arrest, Cross. I wanted something that could help me get my old life back."

Tommy Hayes laughed caustically. "When hell freezes over, that's when you'll get your old life back, Brundage. Assault with a deadly weapon will get you multiple years behind bars in the meantime. You can wait for the big cooldown in prison."

Sampson turned to Hayes. "Anybody ever tell you you're kind of an asshole?"

"Quite often, actually," Hayes said. "But ask me if I care."

I said, "You'll care if the security cams show O'Hare was right here and you let him go because you had a vendetta against Brundage."

"Not going to happen," Winthrop said.

"Not a chance," Hayes said.

But if I were a betting man, I'd have put quite a lot on there being a very good chance indeed.

Sampson and I saw Brundage into an ambulance with a uniformed officer escorting him, then went to the campus police office and had them pull up the video from the security cameras starting from the time Winthrop

and Hayes called for the active-shooter alert. Winthrop and Hayes were right behind us.

A camera on the performing arts building caught a full-face view of Colin O'Hare running into the alley toward the Jesuit cemetery less than a minute before Sean Brundage appeared in pursuit.

"Wait until Internal Affairs gets hold of this," Sampson said to Winthrop and Hayes, who stood there sober and chagrined.

"Says a lot about your judgment, Detectives," I said as they stared at the image of O'Hare. "None of it good. First you blew off a serious investigation into the first victim, then you botched this job. And now we're back to square one with the real Firebug."

OceanofPDF.com

92

I WAS BITTERLY DISAPPOINTED that Colin O'Hare had eluded us and still worried about the missing kids, but when I got home, I set my concerns aside and gave my grandmother and father the good news that I was closer to locating Charlie.

"I found his old baseball coach's jacket in a place he stays in from time to time," I said.

I did not mention that the first Firebug victim had died behind that same place or that my brother's jacket had been lying on the floor six feet from a dead real estate developer.

"He sure could hit a baseball," my dad said. "I remember Charlie was the best of you boys at that."

"Really tore the cover off the ball," I agreed. "And he had range. Excellent shortstop."

Dad got wistful. "I would have loved to see that. And you playing basketball. And every other moment I missed."

Emotion surged in me, but I said, "You left us in good hands."

"Mmm," Nana Mama said, and smiled. "Happy me. Happy times."

Of course they had not all been happy times. And of course my brothers and I had had a lot of coping to do as orphaned kids from the rural South transplanted to the big city. But we did have Nana Mama to guide us.

"What was your happiest time, Mom?" my dad asked.

She thought. "With you. Baby you."

"Baby me," he said and laughed. "Well, huh, that's hard to imagine."

Nana smiled. "Still remember. Me, you, porch. Reggie home. Family."

Bree came into the room, set her briefcase down, and went over to my grandmother's bed. "Good news, Nana," she said. "I've lined up an air ambulance to take you to South Bend."

Nana Mama's smile broadened, and she looked over at her night nurses, Bobby Jain and Juanita Jones. "Lotto."

“We heard,” Bobby said. “Lucky you. When does she fly?” he asked.

“At seven o’clock on the morning of the finals,” Bree said.

“Perfect,” Juanita said. “She’s usually strongest in the morning.”

My cell phone buzzed. It was Blanche Gray, attorney for Frost and Lear.

“Counselor,” I said, taking the call and leaving the room.

“Detective,” she replied. “I’m just getting ready to leave Jeffrey’s office. There are records, deal documents, and encrypted files here that I have never seen before. I think you should seize everything and turn it over to a forensic accountant. If you can, get the FBI involved.”

“I can.”

“Good. I have videoed everything I’ve done here and will put all the files back as I found them before I leave.”

I advised her to lock the office and turn the key over to the security guard. Then I called Ned Mahoney and gave him a briefing on Frost’s murder.

“He was executed,” I said. “He had business across multiple states, and some of it was likely Russian mob–related. I could use the FBI’s help.”

“We’ll send a team tomorrow,” Mahoney promised. “I want to know where all that real estate money came from.”

“So do we, Ned. Thanks.”

Later that night, after my dad and the aunts left for their hotel and Nana Mama went to sleep, I got Bree caught up on the latest happenings. She said she would contact her sources and see if she could find out anything more regarding Frost’s business deals.

Then she asked, “Where do you go from here on the Firebug?”

“I’m going to focus on finding Boog and Anna’s kids. John thinks that O’Hare might have them.”

“That’s the best-case scenario if they’re with O’Hare, Alex,” she said softly. “That if he has them, they’re still alive.”

My heart sank as I nodded. “I know.”

OceanofPDF.com

93

JOHN SAMPSON AND I had the Sunday-morning shift at St. Anthony's kitchen. We were there bright and early, hoping that someone in need of a free meal might have seen the missing kids or Colin O'Hare. The rush finally slowed around eight thirty, but we still had no solid leads on any of them.

"It's like they vanished into thin air," John said, taking off his apron. "Maybe they left the area for good. The kids, I mean."

"O'Hare too," I said.

"People shooting at him, chasing him? He's definitely gone to ground," Sampson said, irritated.

"We've got an APB on him," I said. "Someone will spot him. He's too __"

I was interrupted by an echoing vibration coming from above me. Mass didn't start until ten, so I was surprised to hear the church organ—and even more surprised to hear the soaring tenor voice accompanying it.

Sampson and I looked at each other. "Gotta be," he said.

We went up the back stairs and into the church. The organ music filled the space as we climbed to the choir loft and spotted the vocalist at the keyboard.

At first I thought we'd made a mistake, that a total stranger was behind the music. But then Aldous Campbell glanced over, saw us standing there, smiled, and quieted the organ and his song. The young man's short hair, clean clothes, and scrubbed skin made for a complete transformation. Choir Boy's eyes were clear but a little misty when he said, "Detective Cross. Detective Sampson. Bless you both for saving my life."

"I'm having a hard time believing it's you, Aldous," John said, walking toward him.

"I'm having a hard time believing it's me too," he said and laughed. "I went to the Salvation Army after a few days in detox. They gave me a place

to stay and they're helping me make all my meetings. They kind of said the same things you did, Detective Sampson, about music being my way out."

"Course it is," Sampson said. "You can't bottle up the kind of talent you have. It will eat you up inside if you do."

"It almost did," Campbell said. "But I feel like I've turned the corner. And the best part? The Salvation Army has a regional choir and I'm joining!"

"Good for you," I said. "Damn it, we needed some good news after yesterday."

Choir Boy frowned. He looked shocked when I told him that during his stint in rehab, the Firebug investigation had turned away from Alejandro Rodriguez and toward Colin O'Hare because of O'Hare's personal connection to the murdered Georgetown professor and the fact that he had pumped fuel at the same private airfield where Hawk worked.

"And we think O'Hare figured out that Anna Bananas was onto him and he killed her too," I said. "Did you know Anna? Her son and daughter and a kid named Boog have been missing since right after her body was found."

Campbell was stunned by this news. "Yeah, I knew Anna and her kids. And that boy Boog and his mother, Nelly. That woman can really sing. I mean, she does it professionally."

"So we've heard," Sampson said.

"This is just awful," Choir Boy said sadly.

"Any idea where they'd go?" I asked. "Anna's kids? Boog?"

Choir Boy looked down at his long, delicate fingers as if they held the answers, then he cocked his head to one side and said, "I can't say for sure if I told Boog about this or not. It's a stab in the dark is what I'm saying, but it could be, you know?"

Less than a week ago in this same choir loft, a drunk Choir Boy had told us about a condemned apartment building he sometimes went to. It wasn't far from where the first known Firebug victim—and now Frost—had died, and he'd gone there after the reverend was shot and the Audi was set ablaze beneath the Bridge to Nowhere.

"Place was like my own private bunkhouse," Campbell told us now. "No one ever bothered me there. I got in under the chain-link fence out back and through a broken basement window. And I tried to keep it quiet. Didn't want to attract more users, 'cause that always pulls in the police."

“Uh-huh,” Sampson prompted.

“I was pretty bad there for a while, you know. Days of blackout. But I think I might have told Boog about it,” Choir Boy said. “Might have told him it was a safe place to crash.”

“Worth a shot,” I said. “You have an address?”

“No. But I can tell you how to find the place.”

OceanofPDF.com

94

CHOIR BOY'S DIRECTIONS WERE spot-on.

Forty minutes later we stood in the heat and drizzling rain on a cracked sidewalk in front of a chain-link fence that surrounded a five-story apartment building six blocks east of New Hampshire Avenue and three blocks south of the District's boundary with Takoma Park.

A condemned notice and an announcement of pending demolition had been wired to the chained and locked gate. The notice said the District was in possession of the property, seized for back taxes.

John Sampson called a friend of his in the city planning department to find out about the building's history. It did not take a lot of imagination to figure out why the building was slated for the wrecking ball. The southern half of the fifth floor looked like it had recently burned. The roof had gaping charred holes in some places and a lattice of black rafters in others. The entire building appeared to list to the right.

Sampson hung up, said, "Suspected arson by the former owner three months ago. With all the water laid on the fire, the place shifted off its foundation, which triggered the condemning and seizure proceedings."

"We good to enter?"

"My friend said it's not going to collapse on its own but we should stay away from the fifth floor, southeast corner of the building. That part's not sound."

We followed Choir Boy's directions for entering the building, easily locating the low spot along the back fence. We shimmied under it, then crossed the busted and weedy pavement to the basement window Choir Boy had told us to go to—but it was covered with plywood screwed into the frame. The south rear door was chained and locked. So was the north entrance.

Sampson pulled on an old bulkhead door hidden behind a rusted dumpster at the back of the building, and it protested but opened with a

screech. We heard an ambulance pass in the distance as we turned on our Maglite flashlights and climbed down into the basement.

At first glance, the musty, cobwebbed place appeared empty except for spiders and cockroaches. Then we played our lights over a pile of filthy sleeping bags and trash in the corner, and I recognized the gin brand and whispered, “Choir Boy’s bunk.”

Sampson nodded, shining his light on the dusty floor.

“Other folks been in here,” he muttered as he drew his Glock. “That footprint’s small enough to be from Anna’s nine-year-old.”

I nodded and got out my pistol as well. “How do we handle this? Yell for them?”

“Let’s keep quiet,” he said. “We don’t know the situation.”

I agreed and we moved as one through the basement to the stairs. We climbed up to a fire door that opened into a stairwell with another metal fire door opposite. We stood there listening but heard nothing.

Sampson opened the second metal door, and we stepped into a hall with broken windows at either end that provided some dim light as we crept along, pausing often to listen. The doors to the apartments had all been removed.

The fire and water damage was everywhere. In places, the plasterboard sagged and hung off the walls and the ceilings. Electrical wires and melted plumbing pipes dangled in the cavities created by the flames and the fire hose.

In a few spots you could see right up through the ceiling into the fifth-floor hall. The air there reeked of old smoke.

The dust in the doorways didn’t show many tracks going in or out, but a steady breeze came down the hall, blowing around the curled brown leaves and trash.

We cleared the first floor, then climbed to the second and did the same. Here there were more footprints, some larger, adult, but again disturbed by the swirling breezes. Pigeons roosted on the third floor. They flushed and cackled alarm as they escaped through the gaping windows, leaving their feathers floating in newly stirred dust.

Sampson covered his mouth with his forearm and muffle-sneezed twice before coughing. He lowered his arm, shook his head, whispered, “So much for keeping quiet.”

The words had no sooner left his lips than we heard a loud thump almost directly above us. Dust and bits of mortar fell from the ceiling, and we heard another thump and then a third. This was followed by faint squealing and a fourth thump.

Sampson whispered, “Call for backup?”

“Whoever is up there will hear a radio,” I whispered. “If it’s the kids, we need to get to them now.”

“Here we go, then,” he muttered. “Quiet as mice.”

OceanofPDF.com

95

AS BIG AS HE was, my best friend and partner could move in near silence, which he did as we went back into the stairwell and climbed to the fourth floor. By our calculations we were heading toward the apartments in the southeast corner of the building, facing away from the street.

I almost sneezed but held it. We heard that thumping noise ahead of us and then an insistent squeal from an apartment in the far corner of the building. John Sampson and I moved as quickly as we dared, guns up, peering into the other apartments as we passed but seeing nothing, not even a single track in the dust.

Sampson went to the wall before the last apartment on the right. I slid in behind him, covering our six o'clock and watching the hall at the north end of the condemned building.

The thump again. The squeal again. Only this time the squeal was a garbled word:

"Help!"

John took a quick glance around the corner, pulled back. "It's them," he whispered. "I can see the two boys. They're zip-tied and gagged."

"I'm going," I said; I went around him and through the doorless entry to the apartment, which stank of smoke.

Across the narrow room, Boog and Luke were sitting propped up against the wall. They saw me and started screaming through the cloths stuffed in their mouths as I moved toward them and past an empty kitchen area to my left.

For a moment I thought they were warning me about a danger, but when I took a quick look around the corner to my right, gun up, I saw they were trying to draw my attention to Anna's daughter, Emma. She was lying there, curled up on her right side, zip ties on her wrists and ankles.

The fourteen-year-old was breathing but seemed unconscious. I saw fresh blood on her left temple and tiny pieces of soot on her face and

clothes. Bits of cinder were falling from the ceiling and covering the floor. That's when I noticed I was getting hit with drops of rain as well.

I looked up and saw that the fire had left only a weak lattice of charred joists and burned boards on the floor above, and, higher still, the roof of the building gaped open to the drizzly sky.

I crouched beside Emma. She had a pulse and moaned when I touched her shoulder. "Emma?"

"Huh?" she said weakly.

Sampson came in behind me, and I said, "Call for backup, John, and an ambulance. Let's get them out of here. The rain's coming in and that ceiling looks like it might collapse any second."

Before Sampson could reach for his radio, Luke started crying and holding up his wrists. Boog groaned behind his gag and did the same. Sampson went over and pulled the gag from Luke's mouth. The nine-year-old immediately asked, "Is my sister okay? Is Emma alive?"

"She's alive, Luke," I called over as Sampson cut the young boy's bonds. "We'll get her to a hospital, and she's going to be good."

John pulled off Boog's gag. The teen looked over John's shoulder and screamed, "Detectives, look out!"

I stood up next to Anna's daughter; Sampson stood in front of her son and his friend. Colin O'Hare was in the apartment doorway, aiming a pistol at us.

"Drop your weapons or you all die right now," Bing Bang said. "At this distance, I never miss."

OceanofPDF.com

96

JOHN SAMPSON CROUCHED AND set his weapon on the ground. I did the same.

“Backups,” Colin O’Hare said. “I know the game.”

I drew the small Ruger nine-millimeter from my ankle holster and Sampson got his .40-caliber double-barreled derringer from a holster at the small of his back. We set them down beside our Glocks.

“Slide everything toward me, into the hall, then back away and sit against the wall next to the kids,” O’Hare said. “Nothing funny.”

We did as O’Hare instructed, sliding the pistols across the floor and then sitting with our backs to the wall. The former Special Forces operator came into the little living area.

He gave Emma an indifferent glance and tossed a handful of zip ties at us. “You know the drill.”

“What will you do?” Sampson said, taking one and putting it around his ankles.

“Haven’t decided,” O’Hare said.

“So you’re the Firebug killer,” I said, putting a zip tie around my own ankles. More of the annoying black cinders were falling with the drizzle from the burned-out floor above.

“Not all of them,” Bing Bang said, wiping the watery grit from his face.

“What does that mean?” John said, looping a second zip tie around his wrists.

“It means I didn’t kill those first guys,” O’Hare said. “Not the dude in that other building where Choir Boy and I used to squat and not the guy in the Audi below the bridge.”

“But?” I said.

“But I decided to copycat.”

Sampson said, “Corey McGovern.”

The former Special Forces operator ignored him. “Finish your wrists.

Pull those ties tight with your teeth.”

I got a zip tie around my wrists and pulled the tag end tight with my teeth. Sampson did the same.

“You shot and burned Corey McGovern,” John said.

“The little bitch gave me no choice,” O’Hare said, his voice flat. “She was wild on ecstasy when I ran into her in back of the Avid Eyeball, tried to stick me with my own blade. Had to shoot her. When I saw the gas can there behind the tool place, yeah, I lit her up and left.”

I said, “And you did it again with your uncle Drake Conway. You lured him into Rock Creek Park, then shot and lit him up too.”

“Why?” Sampson asked. “With your aunt gone, and since he has no kids himself, are you his heir? Or at least a beneficiary of his life insurance policy?”

O’Hare’s flat affect broke: “He left no will. His estate goes into probate. But, yes, his attorneys will eventually track me down, and whatever was Uncle Drake’s will be mine.”

“What did he do to deserve that?” I asked.

O’Hare shrugged and said, the flatness returning to his expression and voice, “I’m tired of being homeless. Fought for my country, got nothing from it but nightmares. Uncle Drake was a means to an end, man. Nothing more.”

“Why Jeffrey Frost?” Sampson asked.

“Who?”

“The developer you shot in that building near where the first victim died.”

“Wasn’t me.”

I glanced at Luke, hating that I had to keep pushing. “But what about Anna Stein? Anna Bananas.”

O’Hare shook his head. “Not me either.”

“Sure it was,” Sampson said.

“I had nothing to do with it,” he said.

“Did you kill my mom?” Luke cried.

“No!” O’Hare said. “I do not know what they’re talking about. And you know what? I’m sick of talking anyway.”

I saw him thumb the safety on the Remington 1911. “You going to kill two police officers and three children?” I asked.

Bing Bang’s eyes dimmed. “In the teams, they teach you ‘in for a penny, in for a pound.’”

He raised his gun, aiming toward Luke, who covered his head and moaned, “No.”

Boog spit at O’Hare, “You coward. Shoot me first, coward.”

“Suit yourself, you stupid little meddling brat,” O’Hare said and took a step in Boog’s direction, aiming his gun at him as more of that sooty grit fell.

Boog did not turn away from the gun. He pushed his head toward it and sneered, “Do it, you loser coward asshole.”

OceanofPDF.com

97

“WITH PLEASURE,” COLIN O’HARE said.

A split second later, I heard a furious raging bellow come from the burned-out apartment above us: “Not in my house! Not today!”

I looked up. Through the burned lattice of dripping, charred, and disintegrating wood, I saw a large figure leap high into the air and land on one of the weakest sections of the floor. Before O’Hare could turn his gun toward the figure, what was left of the boards and rafters there gave way with a terrible crack, and a big piece of the fifth floor collapsed on top of all of us.

I raised my hands to deflect debris from my head and saw the figure fall all the way through the ceiling. He hit the rubble a few feet behind O’Hare, who shook the blackened debris off his back before Sampson and I could react. Bleeding from gashes on his head, O’Hare aimed his gun at us and snarled, “Move and you die.”

The kids were screaming.

Behind O’Hare, the guy who’d come through the ceiling staggered to his feet, looking like a wild man. He was covered in dark soot and gray ash, and chunks of burned wood fell off him. Clad in grimy clothes with a tangled beard that hung to his mid-chest and a riot of sooty dreadlocks, the wild man was Black and big and carried a metal pipe about three feet long.

“Not in my house,” he rasped again, his eyes absolutely crazed. “Not today.”

O’Hare turned around, firing his gun as he did. He missed the wild man, who chopped diagonally with the pipe and hit the former Special Forces operator’s right side. I heard ribs break.

Bing Bang lurched left, lifted his gun, and shot again. That round missed the wild man’s head by inches, but he didn’t even flinch. He bent his knees, set his feet, cocked the length of pipe back as if he were a batter standing at the plate, then swung through as O’Hare fired again. The bullet struck the

wild man at the same time as his pipe connected with O'Hare's head.

Bing Bang dropped in his tracks, his skull caved in.

The wild man looked dumbly at O'Hare's motionless body, then down at his own side. He sat down hard in the debris, still holding the pipe.

"I'm shot," he said.

Sampson said, "Metro PD. Drop the pipe, sir."

The wild man blinked, let go of the pipe, and put a hand on his side. He peered at John, who was using a jagged piece of metal from the debris to cut his wrists free, then at me.

"All's good?" the wild man said, slurring slightly. "Everyone good?"

"We're all very good because of you, sir," I said, trying to process what had just happened. "As soon as we get free, we're calling you an ambulance."

He nodded, then gazed at Emma Stein. "Her first."

Sampson cut the zip tie around his ankles, then cut my bonds. He got his radio and called for backup and two ambulances while I checked Luke, who was quietly whimpering, and Boog, who held out his wrists for me to free. Finally, I went to Emma, who had gotten herself into a sitting position and was leaning against the wall.

"Ambulance is on the way," I told her as I freed her from the zip ties.

She nodded, her eyes half-lidded. "My mom really dead?"

"Yes, she is, Emma. I'm so sorry."

Tears began to roll down her cheeks. She tried to stand up.

"You're hurt, Emma," I said. "You probably have a head injury. You should stay right here until the EMTs show up."

"No," Emma said, forcing herself to her feet. She walked unsteadily through the rubble to her brother and sat down beside him, and the two fell sobbing into each other's arms while Boog hung his head.

I started to go comfort the kids, but as I went past the wild man, I slowed. He was still sitting there in the debris, holding his side with now bloody fingers.

I stopped and said, "You're a hero, sir. Thank you."

He looked at me, then blinked as if seeing me clearly for the first time. "You're welcome, Alex."

Between my initial confusion and then my overwhelming disbelief and utter joy, I could barely get his name out. "Charlie?"

OceanofPDF.com

98

MY BROTHER KEPT SAYING he was fine, but when the EMTs arrived on the scene, they found he had a through-and-through wound. The bullet had entered three inches below his rib cage and exited two inches above the ridge of his pelvic bone, and he was bleeding heavily. Then his blood pressure plunged.

The paramedics judged Charlie to be the most urgent case and put him in the first ambulance; they said Emma Stein and the boys would go in the second one. I rode with Charlie. I didn't know if he was conscious enough to understand anything, but I kept telling him how much our father and grandmother loved him and wanted to see him.

"We've been worried about you, man," I said. "We had no idea that you'd gone to the streets. Nana Mama wants to help you. We all do."

He murmured, "Maybe."

The closest hospital was overwhelmed with casualties from a big traffic accident near the Fourteenth Street Bridge, so all ambulances were being diverted to St. Anthony's. The ER staff met us outside and rushed Charlie in and then straight up to the operating room.

The next ambulance that came in had Boog, Emma, and Luke aboard. I told the ER staffers who took them that I didn't know what had happened to Emma.

Luke said, "She got free and tried to escape, and O'Hare hit her with a piece of wood. She didn't move for a while."

They took Boog away for X-rays, and I left Luke with his sister, called home, and told Bree everything that had happened since I'd left that morning. When I told her about Charlie saving the day only to get shot, she choked up.

"Isn't life amazing sometimes?" she said. "Both good and bad."

"Every day," I said. "Tell Nana not to worry, he's going to be okay. I'll come home once I know Charlie's stable."

Dr. Sydney Ames came by and told me that Emma had suffered a severe concussion but would not require surgery.

“I’m moving her upstairs,” Dr. Ames said. “We’ll keep her overnight for observation just in case. And she will probably forget quite a bit of what happened in the hours before she was hit like that.”

“Probably a blessing,” I said.

“How’s your grandmother?”

“Her speech is still a bit off, but she holds court most evenings.”

“Good to hear and give her my best,” Dr. Ames said.

While Emma was moved to a room upstairs, I talked to a social worker I knew, and she began calling around to ensure that Anna Stein’s children would have a home.

I went up to Emma’s new room and told Luke and Emma that, but Luke said flat out he wasn’t leaving without his sister. I assured him that he would not need to leave, that he could stay by her side until she was discharged.

“Where will they put us after that?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but Detective Sampson and I will be there fighting for you,” I said. “We were friends of your mother, and we will make sure you are okay.”

“Did that guy O’Hare really kill my mom?”

“I don’t know. But I promise you we will figure that out as well.”

Luke took that in. “What about, like, her funeral? Burial?”

It felt completely wrong that a nine-year-old had to ask these kinds of questions and face these kinds of issues, so I tried to give him some peace. “We’ll make sure she has a funeral. With you and Emma there.”

That seemed to relieve him. When I left the room, Luke was holding Emma’s hand while she slept.

OceanofPDF.com

99

ON MY WAY BACK to the emergency department to see how Boog was doing, I prayed that Anna Stein's kids would catch a break in life, and soon. I found John Sampson outside Boog's room, and he told me he was praying for pretty much the same thing.

He said Boog's mother, Nelly, was in the room with her son. The thirteen-year-old had several deep cuts, a badly broken arm that would require surgery the following day, and multiple bruises from the ceiling collapse.

Sampson and I went into Boog's room, and Boog told us what had happened. He said Choir Boy had mentioned the condemned building one night when he was drunk, and after Boog found Anna's body by the river, he was terrified that the killer would come for him and Anna's kids, so he'd woken Emma and Luke, and they'd run off to that building. It was just bad luck that Colin O'Hare was there too, in hiding himself, and he took them hostage.

"Boog did something extraordinary today," Sampson told Nelly Bogner. "He challenged O'Hare when that psycho was about to shoot Luke."

"It's a rare thing to put another person's safety before your own," I said.

"They're my friends," Boog said from his hospital bed. "What else would I do?"

Sampson said to his mother, "He's a good kid. You should be proud of him."

Nelly began to cry softly. "I am. Very proud."

John pulled himself up to his full height. "I expect you to stop leaving Boog alone in places like the Bridge to Nowhere."

"That was because—"

"I know why, but now you have to follow through on your promises."

"I will," she assured him. "Like I said, I have a legit job now."

"Good for you," I said. "Good for the both of you."

I left Sampson with the Bogners and went up to the waiting room outside the OR. The attending surgeon on my brother's case came out around one in the morning and woke me up.

He said the surgery had been complicated, which was why it had taken so long, but Charlie was out of the OR.

I asked if I could see him, but the doctor thought it would be better to wait a few hours. Sampson was long gone, and when I looked in on Boog, I saw his mother sleeping in a chair beside him.

When I left the hospital, the streets were quiet. As tired as I was, I savored the light rain coming down, gently pattering on the sidewalk and the roofs of cars.

The porch light wasn't on when I got home, which was a little odd. I used my phone flashlight to get my key into the lock and slipped inside.

I kicked off my wet, sooty shoes and was about to unholster my service pistol and nine-millimeter to put them in the lockbox when I heard voices coming from the living room. I decided to go give Nana the good news about Charlie, something for her to take comfort in.

The front room was dark. So was the dining area and the kitchen, other than a small light glowing above the stove. I padded to the living room and saw my grandmother sitting up in her hospital bed looking at something out of my line of sight.

The night nurses, Bobby Jain and Juanita Jones, were by Nana's bed. All three of them were staring in the same direction, toward the back porch. I took a few more steps, my stocking feet making no noise.

Now I could see their expressions.

Nana and the nurses were clearly afraid of whatever they were looking at.

I started to reach for my weapon.

A big bald dude dressed in black stepped out and leveled a pistol with a suppressor at me from no more than fifteen feet away. A red laser beam from the gunsight found my chest.

"Drop your weapon, Dr. Cross," he said. "Or you die first."

OceanofPDF.com

100

I HELD UP MY left hand, and with my right I reached slowly into my jacket, withdrew the Glock from its holster, and got ready to turn it over to a bad guy for the second time that day, which frankly ticked me off.

I started to consider other options, but after glancing over the gunman's shoulder and seeing Nana Mama's deep concern, I did as he asked, stooping over and sliding the gun across the floor. It skittered down the little plywood ramp we'd had built to accommodate my grandmother's medical equipment.

I looked around but didn't see Bree, Damon, or Ali. I prayed they were sleeping and not dead.

When I stood, the bald man nodded. "Good. Smart," he murmured.

My ears registered a heavy Eastern European accent. My eyes took in the thick, simian brow, the head and neck like stacked concrete blocks, and the shoulders that could have belonged to an aging NFL linebacker.

"Egon Bijan, I presume," I said. "Or whatever your real name is."

Bijan seemed mildly surprised that I'd identified him, but he winked at me. He started to walk toward Nana Mama.

As he did, he said quietly and somewhat apologetically, "You know, I meant only to creep into your house tonight, plant bugs, figure out what your nosy wife knows. But circumstances, circumstances. I did not expect there would be blackout curtains on a dark house. All lights were off. I thought you were all gone or upstairs asleep. I did not know this one sleeps off the kitchen with nurses."

I took several steps toward the top of the ramp but stopped when he kicked my service weapon into the far corner of the room.

A pro, I thought, and several things clicked into place.

Bijan pointed his gun at Nana Mama from the foot of her bed. "Why are your hands under your sheet, old woman? What are you hiding there?"

My grandmother scowled, pushed back the sheet, said, "Bedpan. See?"

Juanita said, “She was peeing when you broke in.”

Bijan’s nostrils flared, and he looked away. “Too much information.”

“You asked,” the nurse said.

I took another sliding step in my stocking feet toward the ramp. Wanting to get his attention away from Nana, I said, “You shot and burned that homeless guy outside the condemned building where my wife met you, Frost, and your friend Tatiana Volt. Why would you do that?”

Bijan did not reply. He waved at the nurses to move away from the bed and took a few leisurely steps toward the monitors that surrounded my grandmother.

I slid forward a few more inches and said, “You have no reason not to answer. You have the upper hand here. Why do it?”

“To scare away squatters, of course,” Bijan said, looking away from the monitors with an amused expression. “And it worked.”

He was only twenty-five feet from me, maybe less, and the ramp was only two steps away.

“So you tried it again under the Bridge to Nowhere,” I said, watching him intently. “You killed Dylan Sentinel. You set his Audi on fire to clear the homeless camps there so you could build luxury condos with river views.”

“Not me,” Bijan said. “A copycat. And the two after the minister. Yes. The prostitute, the professor. All copycats.”

OceanofPDF.com

101

I KNEW THAT LAST part was true because O'Hare had confessed to killing Corey McGovern and his uncle. But my goal was to keep the man talking. "Then how did Anna Bananas get onto you?"

"Who is this?" Bijan said, looking legitimately indignant and confused.

"A homeless woman killed by the river and the Bridge to Nowhere a few days ago."

Bijan shook his head. "You try to blame me for too many things, I think."

Remember, he's a pro, I thought. "But you did shoot Jeffrey Frost, correct? So you and Tatiana Volt could take over the properties."

Bijan paused, then chuckled. "Which we'll get for pennies on the dollar. Of course. Yes."

"Was that done under Volt's orders?"

He laughed at that. "Tati is a bitch. I answer to bigger dogs."

Juanita had been holding it together, but now she broke down. "Are you going to kill us?"

"It is sad," Bijan replied, "but one must clean house from time to time." He grinned wolfishly, then aimed his pistol at the crying nurse. "You first?"

Juanita threw her hands over her face, sobbed, and took several steps back.

"Or you?" Bijan said, pivoting to aim at Bobby, who raised his hands, his chin trembling.

"Please, sir," he said.

"Please what?"

"Don't kill us. Like you said, you came here for other reasons."

"And now there is only one reason."

Bijan kept glancing at me during this interaction. *He's enjoying this,* I decided. Especially the effect he was having on me.

He's a sadist. I saw it clearly in his eyes when he returned his focus to

Nana Mama and aimed his gun at her head from point-blank range. “Or you first, old granny dying in the hospital bed? Would you like that? To be the first to go tonight? To find a quick end to your misery?”

Bijan peered over at me again, openly gloating.

This is his thing. The power trip over his victims before he acts.

I had to fight the urge to explode, which would have given him a reason to act.

He chuckled, still smirking, still enjoying his moment of power, and said in a singsong voice, “I think it’s going to be granny!”

“Not today,” Nana Mama said and hurled her bedpan and its contents into Bijan’s face.

The pan hit his cheek, but weakly, and fell to the floor with a clang. But the urine splashed into Bijan’s eyes, blinding him for a moment.

He roared with disbelief and rage, took a step back, twisted away, and bent over, wiping wildly at his eyes with the sleeve of his gun arm and screeching in Russian. Then he straightened up, spun back toward Nana, raised his gun, and snarled, “Nasty old bitch!”

It was too late.

The second Nana threw the bedpan, I’d dived forward, ducked my shoulder, and rolled down the ramp.

As Bijan bellowed and wiped at the piss in his eyes, I landed on the living-room floor and rolled onto my knees, my right hand clawing at my ankle holster.

While he screamed in Russian and pivoted back to my grandmother in a blind rage, I pulled out my little Ruger backup pistol. By the time Bijan called Nana a nasty old bitch, I was ready.

Before he could get his weapon all the way up to kill her, I shot him twice in the chest and once between the eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

102

TWO MORNINGS LATER, AND despite the trauma of the shoot-out in her own home, Nana Mama was feeling well enough to go on a short walk and take a shower in the downstairs bathroom, which she described as “heaven.”

My brother Charlie was set to be discharged from St. Anthony’s today and had accepted Nana’s offer to fund a detox and rehab stint at a private facility in Virginia.

Ali had already left for school, Damon was sleeping upstairs, and I was getting ready to pick up my brother when my father arrived for one last visit. He had a flight home early that afternoon. My aunts had gone back to North Carolina the day before, leaving us with a fridge and freezer overloaded with prepared meals.

Bree made western omelets for all of us. Nana Mama ate at the kitchen table for the first time since she’d come home from the hospital, and I realized once again that you could never count her out.

“Mom,” my dad said between bites. “Can I ask you a delicate question?”

My grandmother nodded. “Guess.”

“How did you think to throw the, uh, bedpan contents at that dude?”

She looked at him as if he were crazy. “What else I have? IV line?”

We all laughed. Nana had definitely turned a corner. The speech pathologist had confirmed that her language skills were improving. And once again it was her sense of humor that had me smiling when I left the house to pick up my brother at St. Anthony’s. We’d stop back here for a brief visit, then I’d take him to the treatment center.

I barely recognized Charlie when I picked him up. His hair was cut short. The beard was gone. He was moving stiffly, obviously in a lot of pain. But when he got in the car, he told me he had refused any kind of narcotic.

I drove him back to the house, and when I brought him in, Nana Mama

and Dad were overjoyed to see him.

“I promise to stay sober this time,” Charlie told us. “Lying in that hospital bed made me realize how much I’ve lost. I’ve seen the bottom, and I don’t like it there.”

“I’ve been in the exact same spot, son,” my dad said. “As Alicia taught me, there is only one way out of that hole. You can’t do it by yourself with grit and determination alone. You have to surrender all that to a higher power and ask for help.”

Nana Mama nodded. “No go solo.”

“You’re right,” Charlie said. “I’ve tried the other way, and it doesn’t work.”

He kissed Nana on the forehead, told her he loved her, then hugged our father goodbye.

I suppose I could have been cynical about my brother’s chances—I knew more than a few folks who’d achieved sobriety only to let it tragically slip through their fingers.

But I felt optimistic that morning. I felt like Charlie had a real chance at starting over.

On the ride out to the rehab center, I fought the urge to tell him that. And I didn’t ask him about his life on the streets—I didn’t want to make him anxious about the road ahead. Instead, I left everything in the silence of God’s hands. Charlie would have enough time in the coming weeks and months to talk and rediscover the power of the spirit. And he wouldn’t have to deal with all the brotherly baggage between us when he did.

An hour later, we parked outside the rehab center, which had beautiful sylvan grounds with towering oaks and pines on the banks of a rushing tributary of the Shenandoah River.

I shut off the car and said, “Thank you, Charlie, for saving me like that.”

“I didn’t know it was you down there, Alex,” he said matter-of-factly. “Not until you were right in front of me.”

“I know,” I said. “Just the same, thank you for saving me. And Sampson. And those kids.”

Tears welled in his eyes. He hung his head and shook it.

“What’s the matter, Charlie?”

He choked down a sob. “Feels like Nana Mama’s saving me all over again.”

“Course she is, brother,” I said, getting misty-eyed and reaching over to hug him. “It’s what she does.”

OceanofPDF.com

103

AFTER HELPING MY BROTHER check into rehab to begin ninety days of treatment, I drove back to DC.

On the way I called Ellen, Charlie's ex, and told her what had happened and where Charlie was. She sounded relieved and then moved when I described what a hero he'd been, how he'd taken on a former Special Forces operator and saved multiple lives, mine included.

She cried a little. Ellen said she wished him well and was proud that Charlie was at long last trying to recover. When I hung up, I decided that the tide had turned, and it felt damn good.

Ned Mahoney called as I neared Washington to tell me that Egon Bijan was actually Egon Brezec, a Chechen national with deep organized crime ties in Georgia and Belarus. Using a second alias and a legitimate UAE passport, he'd come into the United States through Canada fourteen months ago.

"And Tatiana Volt?"

"We got warrants for her home, offices, and accounts, impounded her jet, and seized her phone and passports," Mahoney said.

"All good, but I'd have her under twenty-four-hour surveillance."

"She's barred from leaving the country."

"Just the same. Bree says the woman is very slippery."

"And the FBI is relentless. Talk soon. Give my best to Nana."

He hung up, and I pulled into the garage at Metro headquarters downtown. Chief Kane stopped me when I passed his office upstairs.

"You're not supposed to be here, Cross," Kane grumbled. "You are suspended pending an investigation of the shooting at your home and the events at that condemned building."

"I'm just here to meet Sampson," I told him. "We'll write up our reports for you, then clear our desks so no one else has to do it. Since you're already shorthanded with Hayes and Winthrop on suspension, we figured it

would help.”

Kane paused, then said, “Be quick.”

I found John Sampson at his desk, adding documents to the Firebug murder books.

“Done with your report on O’Hare?” I asked, sitting down across from him.

“I am,” he said. “Charlie?”

“Officially in rehab.”

“Good news.”

“It is, and I talked to Nana Mama last night about Sean Brundage. She wants to pay for his rehab too, if he’ll go.”

“That is also good news,” John said. “Want more?”

“Definitely. I feel like a glutton for good news today.”

Sampson smiled. “Anna Stein’s kids are going to Chicago with Boog and his mother. Nelly Bogner really does have a well-paying singing gig waiting for her, and she already rented an apartment. Emma and Luke have an aunt, Anna’s sister, in the area, and she’s agreed to take them in. They won’t be far from Boog. They might even end up in the same school.”

“That is a heaping plate of good news,” I said. “I was praying that something positive would finally happen in their young lives.”

“Me too, and there it is,” Sampson said. He picked up a folder from his desk. “I’m going to finish here and take Willow for a bike ride after she gets out of school.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “I’ll be home packing for our trip to Notre Dame.”

“Jannie there already?”

“Trained on their track yesterday,” I said. “She says it’s a fast surface and she sounds relaxed and focused.”

“Perfect,” he said. He opened the folder and started reading.

I started to work on various reports concerning the deaths of the John Doe victim, Corey McGovern, Drake Conway, Jeffrey Frost, Dylan Sentinel, Anna Stein, Colin O’Hare, and Egon Brezec. I didn’t get very far.

“I’ll be damned,” Sampson said, breaking my focus. “This changes a whole lot.”

I looked up. “What does?”

My partner was on his feet, grabbing his wallet, phone, and keys. “I’ll

explain in the car. We need to go to the Bridge to Nowhere one last time."

"We're officially on suspension pending review."

"And I officially don't care," Sampson said. "You coming or not?"

OceanofPDF.com

104

IT WAS HOT, PUSHING ninety. And the humidity was so high there by the Anacostia River that the air felt like mist.

When John Sampson and I climbed out of the car, we heard the distant rumble of thunder. The skies were hostile and brooding ahead of an upcoming storm. Once again, we started through the thick brush toward the ghost ramp. There was no breeze in that forlorn place, no relief from the oppressive conditions.

Sweat was pouring off our brows and soaking our collars and the backs of our shirts when we finally stepped out of the vegetation and took in the hulking frame of the Bridge to Nowhere, the massive stanchions, the north and south embankments, the graffiti, and the sections not waiting for demolition but crumbling on their own.

I looked up and spotted Lainey Locket high on her perch in the upper corner of the north embankment, then followed Sampson's gaze to the south.

"You think Brundage is back up in there?" I asked.

"Released from custody and the hospital yesterday," Sampson replied.

We walked closer, avoiding the ruts in the old service road, keeping our attention on the shadows until we reached the shade and shelter the ramp provided. Up and down both embankments, people were watching us, all of them probably wondering, worrying, and wanting to be ignored.

We obliged them and paused at the scorched earth where Dylan Sentinel and his Audi had burned and peered up the far embankment toward the lair of the high troll of the south.

In Brundage's absence, his shelter and belongings had been scavenged.

"How do we find him now?" I asked.

"We'll figure that out next, sugar," Sampson said. He turned and led the way up the steep north embankment, past the tents and makeshift shelters and people just lying out, trying not to move in the heat.

New people had taken over Boog's and Anna's shelters, but we did not stop to chat with them. We wanted to talk to the high troll of the north.

Lainey Locket was perched in her usual spot, just beneath the tallest part of the Bridge to Nowhere, in the shade of the ramp where that stub of a steel girder jutted out toward the lumberyard, a good sixty feet above the brush and rubble of the decaying ghost ramp.

Wearing a faded blue dress, flip-flops, and a yellow bandanna holding back the riot of her graying mane of hair, Locket stood two steps out on the girder. She watched us with interest when we stopped on a ledge slightly below her and back ten feet.

She held on to a U-shaped piece of rebar overhead with one hand and said, "Detectives. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Just a few lingering things to sort out, Lainey," Sampson said. "With Brundage gone, do you run the show on both sides of troll town?"

"And what an empire it is," she replied, amused.

I said, "When was the last time you saw Brundage?"

"Can't say that I ever kept tabs on the man. But I don't know—five, six days ago?"

We told her he'd been shot while chasing Colin O'Hare and that the Special Forces operator had taken the children hostage and confessed to murdering Corey McGovern and his own uncle before he was killed by an avenging squatter.

Locket's eyes widened. "That's a crazy story. How are the kids?"

We said that Boog's mother was bringing the kids to Chicago and then told her about Choir Boy's stint in rehab.

"You're smiling," I said.

"Well, that's all nice to hear," Locket said. "Nice to hear that folks can actually get out of a place like this."

I told her about Egon Bijan breaking into my house, holding my grandmother at gunpoint, and admitting to killing and burning the first victim and murdering Jeffrey Frost, the developer attempting to control the future of the Bridge to Nowhere.

"Well," she said, "I'm happy to hear you all survived."

"I appreciate that," I said. "But the problem is, we still have two killings unaccounted for—Anna Bananas and the guy in the Audi. O'Hare denied killing them."

She shrugged. “Bing Bang’s been known to lie through his teeth.”

OceanofPDF.com

105

JOHN SAMPSON SMILED, NODDED. “Colin O’Hare was indeed known to lie.”

I said, “But honestly, Lainey, we don’t believe O’Hare was lying in this case. Did we tell you that we identified the body of the guy who burned here?”

“Yeah?”

John said, “He was a defrocked minister named Dylan Sentinel who had sexually abused women up and down the East Coast.”

Locket said nothing.

Sampson pressed on. “The first time I talked to you, you showed me that expired Kentucky driver’s license, and I wondered if it was real. When I took your shotgun, I had it run for fingerprints.”

She stared blankly at us.

“It took a while for everything to come together,” he continued. “But those prints came back as belonging to an Alice McCall. And then I found a complaint filed years ago in Atlanta against Reverend Dylan Sentinel by an Alice McCall.”

Locket said nothing.

I said, “I’m sorry about what Sentinel did to you, Alice. You’re aware that you were one of many, I assume?”

Her chin quivered. “Yes. And call me Lainey. Alice doesn’t exist anymore.”

Sampson said, “Okay, Lainey. I take it that you’re also aware that Sentinel skated on all charges despite multiple allegations from multiple women. It must have galled you to see him show up here, back to his old tricks, looking for new victims.”

The high troll of the north chewed the inside of her cheek. “I saw what he was doing with that girl Corey. I saw the way he was looking at Anna’s daughter, Emma. I confronted him.”

“And?”

“The bastard laughed at me,” Lainey spit. “And then he had the nerve to say he and I should go to the Fall Flower Motel and get a room, for old times’ sake.”

“So you decided to get rid of him by copying the murder of the first homeless man.”

Locket looked away.

I said, “*You* killed Dylan Sentinel, Lainey.”

She would not look at us. “I did. For all the right reasons.”

“How did you do it?”

“Told him I’d meet him by the Fall Flower after he was done with Corey,” she said. “For old times’ sake.” She shuddered.

Sampson said, “And then he drove you down here?”

“After I pulled a gun on him and ordered him to drive me to where a can of avgas had been stashed for me. Then I had Sentinel drive here.”

“You shot him from the back seat, then set the Audi on fire,” I said.

“I did.”

“Who got you the avgas?”

“An innocent intermediary whom I decline to name,” she said evenly.

Sampson said, “You seem to have little remorse over this.”

“I have none,” Locket said, now meeting our eyes and gazing at each of us in turn. “Sentinel deserved it. No—he deserved worse.”

I took a stab in the dark. “Did Anna deserve it too?”

The high troll of the north looked down as if she were studying just how far to the ground it was from six stories in the air.

“Lainey?” I pressed.

Locket kept staring at the space below her as she said, “Anna wasn’t as crazy as she let people think, you know. She’d heard me talk about what Sentinel had done to me, but that night, at, like, four in the morning, she put it together and confronted me by the river.”

“So you killed her and staged the scene,” Sampson said.

She did not reply, just kept looking down. Several moments passed before Locket finally glanced at us. “Anna said she was going to tell you two.”

Sampson nodded and said, “Lainey? Alice? Can you come off that girder there?”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve got to place you under arrest for the murders of Dylan Sentinel and Anna Stein.”

She smiled weakly. “Detectives, I can’t stand the thought of prison, of being locked inside anywhere for long.”

Before either of us could move, she pivoted on the girder and stood sideways.

And then the last high troll lurking beneath the Bridge to Nowhere let go of the rebar over her head and pitched backward into six stories of nothingness.

OceanofPDF.com

106

TWO DAYS LATER, I still couldn't get the haunting image of Lainey Locket—Alice McCall—falling to her death out of my mind.

I knew it would be a long time before that image left me.

Bree, Ali, Damon, and I had flown commercial to South Bend, Indiana, yesterday, and Nana Mama had come via air ambulance this morning with nurse Juanita Jones, who'd insisted on returning to work despite the trauma of the other evening's events.

We were all at Notre Dame University for the NCAA Division One track-and-field finals.

Juanita pushed my grandmother in her wheelchair up the ramp to our seats. Nana had an oxygen cannula below her nose and a blanket over her lap despite the heat, but she seemed as alert and happy as I'd seen her since she'd fallen. Juanita and Nana Mama sat directly behind us, next to my dad, who had flown up from Florida with his wife, Alicia, who was also in a wheelchair.

Ali sat to my left, Bree to my right, and Damon was on Bree's other side directly in front of my grandmother.

"Can we see the Touchdown Jesus from here?" Ali asked.

"No, that's closer to the football field, not the track stadium," Damon said, referring to the famous *Word of Life* mosaic mural on the exterior of the Hesburgh Library, depicting Jesus and His followers.

"He sees," my grandmother said. "Jannie gonna."

"Amen to that," Bree said and squeezed my hand.

"We'll see, Nana," I said, looking over my shoulder at her. "She made the finals by the skin of her teeth."

Jannie had not run her best in the prelims. She'd pulled through to the final based on time; hers was one of the two fastest behind the six athletes who'd gone one, two, and three in the two qualifying heats.

"The heats don't count," my father announced. "This is the one that

counts.”

Ali shouted, “There she is!”

We saw Jannie come out of a tunnel in sweats and begin lightly jogging around the track. I had binoculars and could see her clearly.

“How’s she look?” Bree asked.

“That’s her game face,” I said. “She’s come to play.”

“Nah,” Damon said. “I know my little sister. She didn’t come to play. She came to *win*.”

“Amen to that,” Juanita said emphatically, and we all laughed, especially Nana.

Jannie jogged almost all the way around the track, then went onto the infield and performed the ballistic stretches she did before every race.

The other runners were doing the same around her, but through my binoculars, I watched only Jannie. She didn’t seem to be concerned about the fact that she was about to challenge some of the fastest female college athletes in the country.

I swung my binoculars and spotted Kim Granger, the junior from Stanford University with the top qualifying time. Granger had a scarily fast start and remarkable focus and stamina. She’d go out in lane four as the favorite.

Patricia McKnight, the second-fastest qualifier, was a redshirt senior from the University of Texas. Like Jannie, she had been one of the country’s top runners at the high-school level. McKnight had struggled early at the collegiate level but had come on strong in her final three years of eligibility.

Amelia Rogers had not qualified for the NCAA finals in her first two years at Clemson University, but since transferring to the University of Florida, she’d been on a steady rise, posting some of the fastest four-hundred-meter times in the country on a consistent basis. Rogers had lane three.

An announcer called the women’s four-hundred-meter finalists to the start. Jannie jogged over and stood at the rail twenty rows down in front of us.

She yelled, “Nana!”

My grandmother and all of us looked down. My daughter pointed at her chest, made a running pantomime with her arms, held up four fingers on her

right hand, then pointed at Nana.

“What?” my grandmother said.

“‘I run for you,’” Ali shouted. “That’s what she’s saying, Nana! ‘I run for you’!”

“I see, I see,” Nana Mama said, tears on her cheeks as she waved at Jannie, who turned and jogged to her place in lane one.

The announcer ran through the finalists’ pedigrees. The athlete in lane six was a senior from Iowa State and the Big Twelve conference champion. The woman in lane two ran for Duke and was the Atlantic Coast Conference champion. The athlete in lane seven came from the University of Southern California and had won the Big Ten four-hundred-meter championship in a convincing fashion.

Jannie Cross was introduced as a US high-school record holder in the four-hundred-meter and the only athlete from a historically Black college running in the finals. We all cheered wildly.

But I knew one of my daughter’s biggest challenges was in lane eight—Addison Marks, the UConn junior who’d won the regional race where Jannie qualified for the final meet. Even though Marks had run a slightly slower qualifying time than my daughter, Jannie didn’t count her out.

“She’s been here twice,” Jannie had told me that morning over the phone. “And like you’ve said a bunch of times, never underestimate the value of experience.”

Even though I had indeed told my daughter about the value of experience on multiple occasions, and even though she was seemingly a lamb among lions, Jannie appeared unintimidated when they were called to their blocks.

I looked behind me and saw my dad, Alicia, Juanita, and Nana Mama leaning forward in their seats. My grandmother looked at me, her eyes shining and bright.

“This it!” she said. “Exciting!”

I grinned and nodded, then looked back at the track as the announcer called the runners to their marks. Jannie settled in early, dropped her head, and began her breathing exercises, still relaxed.

“Set.”

She coiled.

At the crack of the starter’s gun, Jannie exploded forward.

OceanofPDF.com

107

I'VE LEARNED A LOT about the human mind, evil, good, and otherwise, in my studies, and I've come to believe that no matter the person, no matter the circumstances, no matter the stakes, the more emotion an event stirs, the deeper it will be etched into the soul, for better or worse.

That race and its aftermath became one of those big soul-changers for everyone present. But when the gun went off, we had no idea what would happen, and all we could do was cheer our lungs out as Jannie came out of the blocks low and choppy, her eyes focused a foot or two in front as she drove, trying to get up to speed in the first forty meters.

In earlier races, Jannie's start had been her weakness. But she and her coach at Howard had worked on that for months, and it showed. She kept her upper body low and then tick-tick-ticked herself more and more erect with each charging stride toward the first turn.

In lane eight, however, Addison Marks was charging too, and as they entered that first curve, I said to Bree, "The girl from UConn is flying."

"I see her," Bree said. "So is the junior in lane four."

It was true. Granger, the Stanford junior, was digging hard as they exited the first turn. Marks of UConn had the lead in lane eight with Granger of Stanford in second, Rogers of Florida in close third, McKnight of Texas in fourth, and—and Jannie Cross of Howard in fifth.

The runners surged down the backstretch. Through the binoculars I saw my daughter was not panicking or forcing the pace. She was calmly running her race.

"Wait for it," I whispered.

The start was my daughter's biggest challenge, but the last half of a four-hundred-meter race was her greatest strength.

"Wait for it," I whispered again as they flashed past the halfway mark.

And then Jannie did what she does best.

Her stride opened a good six inches. Her turnover quickened. And at

each foot strike, she bounced, her torso and head lifting and shifting forward, anticipating the next foot strike, where she bounced higher and longer still.

"She's bounding now!" Damon yelled. "She's going for it!"

"Jannie's right on that girl from Texas!" Ali yelled as they entered the far turn.

It all seemed like a dream after that, seeing my daughter pass McKnight of Texas and bear down on Rogers, the Florida athlete, as they exited the curve. The four top runners headed for home with Marks of UConn leading, Granger of Stanford in a close second with Rogers right on her shoulder—and Jannie right on Rogers's.

The crowd was going wild. We were all going nuts as the foursome stayed in tight formation over those last sixty yards.

Marks stayed strong and in front. Granger lost a little ground. But Jannie never relented, closing the gap between herself and Rogers with every stride.

In the last ten yards, Jannie hit some kind of afterburner, some gear that God gave her at birth, and she went past the Florida runner and crossed the finish line in third. I threw my arms up and turned and saw Nana Mama doing the same.

We were all screaming and celebrating as Jannie went to Granger and Marks and hugged them both. I admit it, I was bawling my eyes out to see my kid do something so miraculous and then handle it with such poise, humility, and sportsmanship.

Third in the nation!

Jannie started toward us, shaking hands with some of the other runners. I was wiping the tears from my eyes when I heard Juanita say, "Mrs. Cross?"

Then my dad said, "Mom?"

"Dad!" Ali yelled. "Dad!"

I looked over my shoulder at Nana Mama.

In a single crushing moment, I knew that our lives would change forever: that we were the Cross family before, and now we were the Crosses forever after.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Patterson is the most popular storyteller of our time and the creator of such unforgettable characters and series as Alex Cross, the Women's Murder Club, Jane Smith, and Maximum Ride. He has coauthored #1 bestselling novels with Bill Clinton, Dolly Parton, Michael Crichton, and Viola Davis, as well as collaborated on #1 bestselling nonfiction, including *The Idaho Four, Walk in My Combat Boots,* and *Filthy Rich.* Patterson has told the story of his own life in the #1 bestselling autobiography *James Patterson by James Patterson*. He is the recipient of an Edgar Award, ten Emmy Awards, the Literarian Award from the National Book Foundation, and the National Humanities Medal.

OceanofPDF.com

BOOKS BY JAMES PATTERSON FEATURING ALEX CROSS

Cross & Sampson
Return of the Spider
The House of Cross
Alex Cross Must Die
Cross Down
Triple Cross
Fear No Evil
Deadly Cross
Criss Cross
Target: Alex Cross
The People vs. Alex Cross
Cross the Line
Cross Justice
Hope to Die
Cross My Heart
Alex Cross, Run
Merry Christmas, Alex Cross
Kill Alex Cross
Cross Fire
I, Alex Cross
Alex Cross's Trial
Cross Country
Double Cross
Cross (also published as *Alex Cross*)
Mary, Mary
London Bridges
The Big Bad Wolf
Four Blind Mice
Violets Are Blue
Roses Are Red

Pop Goes the Weasel
Cat and Mouse
Jack & Jill
Kiss the Girls
Along Came a Spider

For a preview of upcoming books and information about the author, visit JamesPatterson.com or find him on Facebook, X, Instagram, Substack, or TikTok.

OceanofPDF.com

Dear Reader,

My life's work has been to get kids reading. That's because reading saves lives.

Think about this: millions of fourth graders across America—a full 67% of them—read at or below the barest minimum competency level.*

One big reason is because they've never read a single book they've loved.

Reading shouldn't be work. Reading should be play. Reading should be joy.

But it's not the school's job or the library's job to get kids reading. It's our job. It's mothers and fathers and grandparents and aunts and uncles and carers.

You need to read to your kids.

And don't just pick books that you think are good—find books that *they* think are good. Put books in their hands that make them say, "I love that." Ones that make them say, "Give me another book."



For more information, visit **JoinRaisingReaders.com**

RAISING READERS
Books Build Bright Futures

*2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment: www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading

OceanofPDF.com